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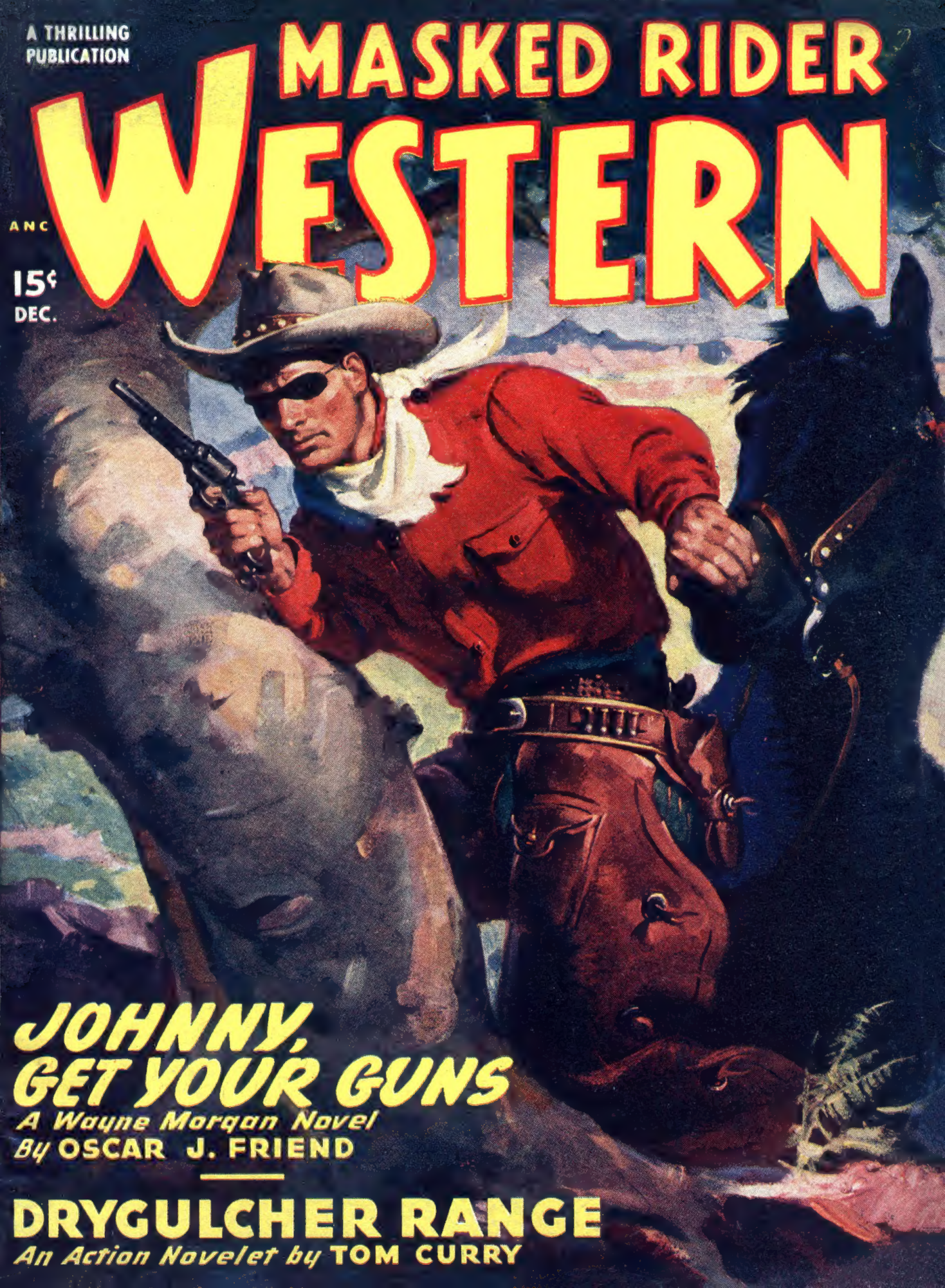

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A Wayne Morgan Novel
By OSCAR J. FRIEND

DRYGULCHER RANGE

An Action Novelet by TOM CURRY

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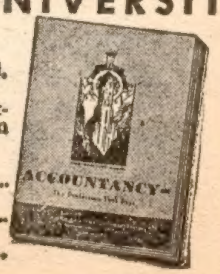

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Vol. XXV, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION December, 1948

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by Oscar J. Friend

When Mesquite needs a gunsmoke cleanup, Wayne Morgan takes on the chore—and with his Yaqui pard to side him, braves the challenge of the Jorrum Creek crew of renegades and despoilers! **13**

COMPLETE NOVELET

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HI WADDIES, grab yourself a brone from the corral and we will be off on another trail jaunt. No doubt through the past hot summer, there have been many thousands of people who, in order to escape the heat of the cities of the South and East, have gone westward for their vacations, gone westward seeking higher elevations and cooler atmosphere.

The seashores of course are as a rule cool, but when one spends only a part of a day, a couple of days or a week-end at the seashore and then has to go back to the city with its myriad tall buildings, its pavements throwing back and increasing the intensity of the heat, it just isn't much fun—at least the going back to the city isn't!

So it is that each summer finds thousands going westward, traveling at least part time over the old trails traversed by the pioneers, those men who went West when it was a raw, wild country.

Hardships of the Pioneers

In our little old country school in Texas when I was a kid, we used to read essays or speak pieces each Friday afternoon. One of my favorites was about the Western pioneers. I don't know who wrote it, and can't remember all of it, for that was more than half a century ago, but it started like this. "The Western pioneers, what hardships and dangers they encountered!" And—"they ate and slept in canvas covered wagons with the howl of savage beasts about them, that they might build homes for themselves and their families."

It is through the hardships and dangers that beset those hardy pioneers, dangers and privations which, though great, were not enough to make them turn back, and it is through their courage and determination, that we are now able to travel over those once dangerous trails in streamlined trains and in high-powered luxurious automobiles. While progress and civilization have taken away the hardships and the dangers, the beauties of the West still remain.

Some of the towns we now find in the West are very old. They were there before the coming of the pioneers from the East, but they were small, and some of them are still small, but all about them are scenic wonders if one is a nature lover and looking for and able to appreciate the glorious works of nature.

Under Four Flags

There is one town or little city which is now a state capital. Its altitude is about 7,000 feet, and its population now must be around 25,000. It is the capital of New Mexico and it started life back in 1609 with the florid title of the Royal City of the Holy Faith of Saint Francis. La Villa Real de la Santa Fe de San Francisco. Of course you know its name, Santa Fe. It has been a capital continuously for more than three hundred years, and the flags of four nations —Spain, Mexico, the Confederacy, and the United States, have flown over its ancient Palace of the Governors, a building which still stands along the north side of the plaza and whose history is the history of Santa Fe and New Mexico. It is the oldest capital within the boundaries of the United States.

Never an industrial city, and even now

(Continued on page 8)

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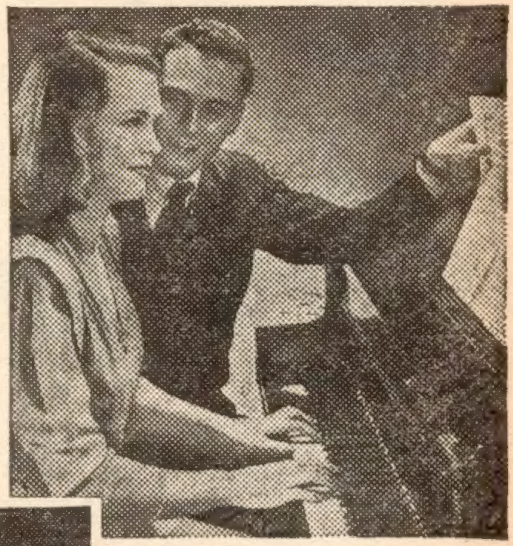
Music is the magic key to friendship, fun, romance. The person who can play a musical instrument is always sure of a welcome. Why not let music open up a new world for you. Thousands have discovered unexpected pleasure and profit in music, thanks to the unique method that makes it amazingly easy to learn.

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

sixteen miles from the main line of the railroad, Santa Fe nestles in the little valley of Rio de Santa Fe where it emerges from the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains on the east. To the south are the Sandia Mountains, in the west is the Jemez Range. Surrounded by those snow-covered peaks, in a land of vast distances and deep colors, this spot, from ancient times, has been a magnet for travelers, and as time has passed its citizens have seen to it that the magnet is kept ready to draw the traveler, as its major industry today is the tourist and vacation trade.

A City of Charm

The charm of the Royal City is quickly felt. The ancient narrow streets and the brown adobe houses are thick with deeds and memories. In the evening the fragrance of piñon smoke fills the air, for Santa Fe is a city of fireplaces. It is a town of patios where hollyhocks nod, where towering cottonwoods spatter with shade, here a crumbling gateway, there an ancient wall whose adobe bricks show through the broken earthen plaster. From the eminence of a nearby hill are visible, sun-washed in the daylight, thick on the floor of the valley and scattering to the foothills, clusters of flat, rectangular adobe houses along winding roads, while in the center of town, above the roof tops and the occasional smokestacks and the arms of the cottonwoods, the glistening dome of the State capitol may be seen. From the same hill at night the town's glimmering lights are a handful of stars flung across the valley.

I have heard New Mexico citizens boast that every weed in the state produced a flower and around Santa Fe this seems to be true.

Santa Fe has seen much history in its crooked streets and venerable plaza; it has seen wars and rebellions, Catholic feasts and devout processions, Spanish men-at-arms, soldiers of Mexico, the Confederacy, and the Union; the bull-whackers and caravans of the Santa Fe Trail, Spanish women in black shawls, and Indians from the nearby pueblos wrapped in blankets, for here are blended, as nowhere else in the United States, the full rich patterns of three distinct cultures—Indian, Spanish and American.

(Continued on page 10)

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 8)

The settlement was founded in the winter of 1609-10 by Don Pedro de Peralta, third governor of the province of Nuevo Mejico, at a spot known to the Pueblo Indians as Kuapoga, or "the palace of the shell beads near water." Ruins, almost obliterated when the Spaniards came, showed that this was once the site of a Tano Indian village. Today's dwellers, in digging foundations for their homes, frequently unearth remnants of the prehistoric past in the form of pottery fragments, implements, and human bones.

When Peralta came to Santa Fe, he built the palacio for a fortress, laid out the plaza, and planned a walled city, and even now at places ruins of the ancient wall may still be seen. In the Palace, built the year the town was founded, sixty Spanish governors ruled the vast territory over a period of more than two hundred years, and maintained the Spanish borderlands against invasion from the north. From the time of its founding to the present day, the town has been a continuous seat of government.

By 1617, with only forty-eight Spanish soldiers and settlers in the province—a province which extended from the Mississippi to the Pacific, from Mexico as far north as people roamed—the Franciscan friars had built eleven churches, had converted 14,000 Indians to the Roman Catholic faith and had prepared as many more for conversions.

The Royal Highway

Throughout the Spanish times Santa Fe was the center of both the explorations and the missions to the Indians. From Chihuahua through El Paso del Norte came caravans and settlers on a route which came to be known as El Camino Real, The Royal Highway.

Trouble with the Indians, however, continued throughout the seventeenth century, for though they nominally accepted conversion, they persisted in their old forms of worship, and in 1645 there was an uprising of the Indians because some of them had been flogged by the Spaniards for refusing to give up their faith.

From year to year conditions grew more serious until in 1680 under the San Juan Indian Pope, the northern pueblos revolted.

(Continued on page 105)

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Today it is known that they discovered and learned to interpret certain *Secret Methods* for the development of their inner power of mind. They learned to command the inner forces within their own beings, and to master life. This secret art of living has been preserved and handed down throughout the ages. Today it is extended to those who dare to use its profound principles to meet and solve the problems of life in these complex times.

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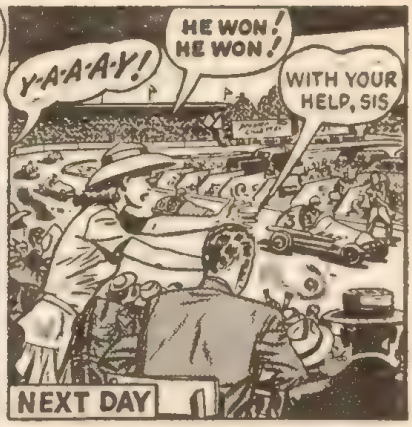
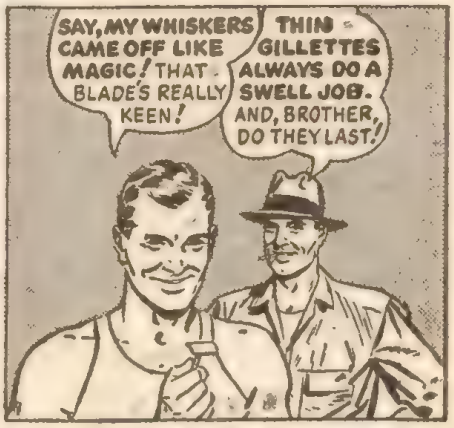
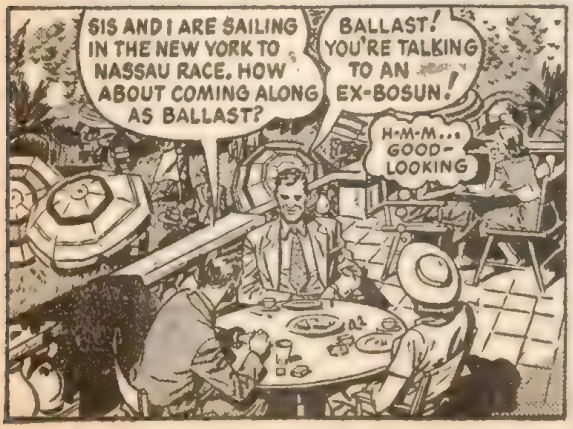
DOUBLE VICTORY FOR DOUG...

DOUG DANIELS, MIDGET RACE DRIVER, IS MAKING FINAL ADJUSTMENTS ON HIS LATEST MODEL WITH WHICH HE HOPES TO WIN TOMORROW'S $5,000 HANDICAP, WHEN...






SIS AND I ARE SAILING IN THE NEW YORK TO NASSAU RACE. HOW ABOUT COMING ALONG AS BALLAST?
BALLAST! YOU'RE TALKING TO AN EX-BOSUN!
H-M-M... GOOD-LOOKING

FOR SPEEDY, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES AT A SAVING, TRY THIN GILLETTES. AMONG ALL LOW-PRICED BLADES, THEY'RE BY FAR THE KEENEST AND LONGEST-LASTING. ALSO, THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY... PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM NICKS AND IRRITATION. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢

New ten-blade package has compartment for used blades.

JOHNNY, get your GUNS

Mesquite needs a roaring cleanup, and Wayne Morgan takes on the chore!

OSCAR J. FRIEND

a Masked Rider novel

CHAPTER I

Celebration

FOUR men from Jorrum Creek were whooping it up in the Cowboy's Retreat when the stranger entered. He paused long enough at the batwings to size up the situation, and then moved in unobtrusive fashion, not toward the bar, but toward the dance hall side of the house where he singled out the hostess. In no time at all he had her seated with him at a wall table and engaged in conversation.

He had a certain air, this stranger. Tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired, electric

blue of eye, he could have commanded attention under almost any conditions short of a cyclone. When he chose to be self-effacing—which he could do to perfection—there lingered about him an atmosphere of ghostly importance as if to boast that here was a man who could stand out from the crowd if he willed, here was a personage of note behind his veil of anonymity.

At any rate, Flora Drake found the conversation of interest. He was chatting with her on her favorite subject—Johnny Winfield.

THE quartet from Jorrum Creek steadily grew noiser, more boisterous, most obnoxious. Other patrons, except for the blue-eyed stranger across the width of the house, were becoming apprehensive and casting wall-eyed glances toward the exits. For the Jorrum crew had reached the stage where they fancied themselves as golden-voiced singers, tophand cowboys on any range, and the best barroom brawlers in the world.

The occasion? None, unless they were celebrating Aunt Betsy Jorrum's one hundredth birthday anniversary. Aunt Betsy, dead these nineteen years, had been killed in an Indian raid on Jorrum Creek when, with a mere handful of Jorrums and followers, she had fought a large band of marauding Comanches to a standstill. For once Comanches had met with a more savage tribe.

There was an old saying in Hackamore County to the effect that when Jorrum Creek riders were on the rampage prudent men sidestepped with care, while hound dogs tucked in their tails and ran under porches. Certainly it was true that when Jorrum men descended on Mesquite, the county seat, nobody was foolhardy enough to draw their attention deliberately or invite their quick anger. Especially after the late Sheriff Baylor, a mule-headed man at best, had insisted on walking into a shotgun in the hands of "Sugar Babe" Jorrum, and had abruptly departed this life on the wings of a double-barreled charge of number six buckshot.

The leader of the quartet, Sugar Babe Jorrum, was tough as a boot, tall as a young tree, and weather-beaten red of complexion. A strutting turkey gobbler, only far more dangerous. He had two claims to distinction. He was old "Blaze" Jorrum's favorite nephew, and he had killed a lawman.

He hurled his empty liquor glass against the back bar mirror, where it shattered without breaking the plate glass, and graduated to the bottle. Gripping the quart container by the neck, he led his quarrelsome contingent over to the battered piano midway of the double building.

"Big Mitch," "Little Mitch," and "Bearcat" Mahoney navigated the space by locking arms together and tacking across the floor to the tune of "The U-P Trail." The distinction between the two hulking Mitchell brothers was purely one of age. Alike as two giant peas in a pod, Big Mitch was a scant two years the elder. Bearcat Mahoney was stockier of build, with a wild-hair mustache which stuck out at all angles, and a whispering laugh that made him sound like an asthmatic cat.

They brought up in a ragged row before the piano which stood on a little dais in front of an eight-foot stair landing. A short flight of steps from left and right led up to this landing from dance hall and saloon. From the landing the main stairs rose to the second floor atop a solid partition that separated the rear half of the dance hall from the back half of the saloon.

Sugar Babe Jorrum halted at the edge of the semicircular dais and scowled at the deserted instrument. He raised puzzled eyes to the slender individual in immaculate Prince Albert who sat in a leather armchair on the landing just above him.

"Where's your musician, Croyden?" he demanded.

Mark Croyden, owner of the Cowboy's Retreat and an interesting figure in his own right, stared down at the tough quartet while mentally estimating the total breakage and damage the house was

to sustain, and how he could collect without riling Jorrum feelings. His long, heavy-chinned face did not change expression. His deep-set gray eyes, which many folks swore could appraise a man's pocket money to within a dollar, slowly kindled to life.

He was thinking of the shift in local affairs and what this Jorrum Creek man had had to do with it. Sheriff Baylor had been in the wrong by not having a search warrant when he had invaded Jorrum

sor, convinced his choice that he was just the man for job, and then had talked Judge Garvey into appointing his stooge to finish out the unexpired term. But something had gone wrong. While, so far, his private schemes were unaffected, things were not working out as Croyden had planned.

"Hey Croyden!" Sugar Babe Jorrum called out angrily. "I asked yuh where at is that piano-playin' fool of yours."

Mark Croyden stirred and made answer

WAYNE MORGAN

territory in the matter of Bill Haglin's cow, but that hadn't made Sugar Babe Jorrum in the right.

Nevertheless, the hasty killing over the question of ownership of a mere twenty-dollar cow had left the sheriff's office suddenly vacant. Mark Croyden had had considerable to do with this state of affairs.

He had been struck with what he considered at the time a wonderful idea. He had personally selected Baylor's successor, convinced his choice that he was just the man for job, and then had talked Judge Garvey into appointing his stooge to finish out the unexpired term. But something had gone wrong. While, so far, his private schemes were unaffected, things were not working out as Croyden had planned.

"Hey Croyden!" Sugar Babe Jorrum called out angrily. "I asked yuh where at is that piano-playin' fool of yours."

Mark Croyden stirred and made answer in his soft, deliberate way. "You mean Johnny Winfield? He doesn't work here any more."

"That's a heck of a note. Where's yore entertainment? How can folks dance without music? I crave some tunes to sing by. What become of that feller? He was only a kid, but he could shore wrassle this pianer."

"You'll have your music," Croyden promised in smooth evasion, flicking his eyes toward the dance hall side of the

house without moving his head. "Flora!"

The hostess at the table with the nice-looking stranger got to her feet. Her companion politely arose with her, bowed to her murmured apology, and remained standing to watch her approach the base of the T-shaped stair landing. At length he folded his arms and leaned back against the wall where he remained so quietly that he faded out of the notice of everybody, including the keen-eyed Mark Croyden. But Croyden had a lot of weighty matters on his mind.

A capable dance hall hostess in her late thirties, considered with favor by her employer, Flora Drake was a good-looking woman. Her face was pretty under the rouge, perhaps a trifle hard around the lips, but the crow's feet at the corners of her gray-green eyes were still tiny, while her figure remained trim and graceful.

SHE wore a décolleté sort of crimson ballroom gown which reached almost to her ankles, to distinguish her from the regular dance girls in their bespangled knee-length skirts. Her blonde hair, touched up nowadays with a toothbrush wetted in peroxide, was piled high on her head and held in place by a tortoise-shell comb of Spanish design.

"The dance hall isn't open for dancing until after supper," she said in a pleasant but firm voice to forestall any afternoon wrestling with these whisky-soaked brawlers from Jorrum Creek.

Sugar Babe Jorrum bridled at once. His eyes narrowed meanly.

"If I wanna dance now—" he began truculently.

"Find an accompanist for Mr. Jorrum and his men, Flora," Croyden intervened smoothly. "They want to sing more."

The hostess surveyed the half-drunken and thoroughly ugly quartet in swift appraisal. Twenty years of playing Western dance halls and frontier towns had taught her how to handle almost any situation. She knew how deadly these men could be, and she knew without looking up at him that Mark Croyden expected her to handle them without assistance from him. It wasn't that he was afraid, either. She doubted if Mark Croyden was ever afraid of anything.

"I'll play for them," she said, deftly adjusting the piano stool and seating herself at the keyboard. "What'll you have, boys?"

Deft as she was, she wasn't quick enough to escape a slap on the rear from Big Mitch and a rough pinch on her bare upper arm from Little Mitch.

"Mind your manners," she warned crisply. "Keep your hands to yourselves if you really want music."

"If I wanna dance—now—with you," Jorrum repeated in a cold voice, refusing in drunken obstinacy to be sidetracked, "it don't matter when yore dance hall's open."

"But if I dance there would be no piano music," she said, striking a few chords and running her fingers in rippling fashion along the keys. "What are you men singing?"

"Can yuh play 'Buffalo Gals'?" Big Mitch asked, not the least abashed at her rebuff.

"We already sung that 'un once," protested Bearcat Mahoney. "How about 'Little Brown Jug'?"

Sugar Babe Jorrum tilted the bottle against his lips and let the liquid fire gurgle smoothly down his ugly red neck. Removing the flask, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand which he subsequently wiped upon the seat of his faded levis. The bottle started traveling around the group.

"You Mitchell men keep yore hooks off the gal," he ordered. "If there's any pawin' done I'll do it." He dropped his hand familiarly upon Flora Drake's bare shoulder. "Play somethin' classic, sweetheart, like 'Endearing Young Charms'."

"Your gang wouldn't know the words," she said brusquely shrugging off his hand. "Mountain music is more their caliber. How's 'Arkansas Traveler'? Or 'Turkey in the Straw'?"

Nevertheless, she swung into the requested number and the only vocal response was a humming of the tune. The whisky bottle came back to its owner empty. Jorrum stared at it sourly, started to hurl it against the stair landing wall, caught Croyden's eye and reconsidered. He set the bottle down on top of the piano.

"Barkeep, bring another bottle of likker!" he yelled.

Flora glanced up in time to see Mark Croyden signal a firm negative to the

Morgan blocked the blow and brought his own right fist in a terrific counter-blow from near his knees (CHAP. III)

bartender. Fumbling desperately at the keys for something suitable, she found her way into "Polly-Wolly-Doodle." At once the Jorrum henchmen started roaring out the words. Surrendering to the spell of the music, their leader joined in.

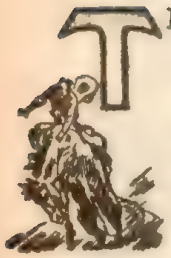
Having found the type and style of music most acceptable, the hostess went from one old song to another. A small crowd began gathering around at a discreet distance. The more restive customers seized this opportunity to depart before any storm broke. While Mark Croyden exhaled a long breath of relief and relaxed in his chair. Flora Drake was really a honey.

She had just begun playing, "Oh, My Darling Clementine," and the Jorrum Creek quartet—by now a full gallon-ette—were shouting out the lyrics of the Forty-niner and his big-footed daughter when the batwings parted to admit a man attracted by the uproar. Mark Croyden, facing the front of the house from his vantage point, stiffened imperceptibly.

"Oh, no!" he groaned. "Surely not this."

CHAPTER II

"I'm The Sheriff!"



THE man who had entered the barroom was a slim young fellow in his early twenties. Croyden knew him to be twenty-two, to be exact. He had hair of tow color which had not yet settled down to be a becoming adult blond. His lean face, while not particularly immature, was more that of a dreamer than a practical doer. His hands were slender, supple, and white.

He was dressed in ordinary cowland garb—checked woolen shirt, levis, cowboy boots, flat-crowned tan Stetson with medium brim. The only thing that distinguished him from the average young cowboy on the loose were the highly polished badged pinned to his shirt front and the pair of six-shooters in new crisscrossed cartridge belts low on his lean thighs.

His hazel-green eyes flicked over the place in lightning appraisal and came quickly to rest on the boisterous quartet clustered around the piano on the dais. A queer look of surprise crossed his face. His eyes began lighting up in a glowing way as though somebody were twisting a rheostatic control on his back.

Then he walked forward with a businesslike stride that had something of the ominous about it. Shouldering his way through the sparse crowd, which fell back and scattered in swift apprehension upon recognition of him, he stepped upon the dais and tapped the leader lightly on the shoulder.

"Say, ain't yore name Sugar Babe Jorrum?" he demanded.

Mark Croyden, signaling frantically from the landing, was ignored. Jorrum jerking away from the tap like a shying horse, jostled the pianist. The music died way in discord as he wheeled to face the speaker. Flora Drake, looking up swiftly as the voice stilled, met the new arrival's queerly glowing eyes, and her hands half-lifted in sudden appeal.

"Oh, Johnny!" she cried in frantic protest. "No, no!"

"Hello, Flora," Johnny answered, fastening his eyes on the man he had accosted. "Better call it a session and skip out. . . . I asked if you wasn't Sugar Babe Jorrum, mister."

"What the devil yuh mean bustin' our song up?" Jorrum snarled. "Shore, I'm Sugar Babe, and I'm goin' to comb yore hair with my spurs for . . . Why, you're the missin' piano player! Sit down, kid, and let's have some high, wide, and fancy music."

"I ain't a piano player any more," said Johnny, pointing to the glittering badge on his chest. "I'm the Sheriff of Hackamore County."

"All right," Jorrum growled impatiently. "Set down and play us some tunes anyway."

"The only tune I got for you, Jorrum, is this," Johnny said. "I'm arrestin' yuh for the shootin' of Tom Baylor, former sheriff of this county."

"Huh?" Surprise at the young fellow's temerity gave way to quick anger and drunken laughter. "Yuh better wear sharper claws when yuh try to tree me." Sugar Babe Jorrum suddenly reached out and grabbed the new sheriff around the waist.

Blocked by this move from quick reach of his guns, being swept off his feet into

a crushing hug, Johnny acted with dispatch. He snatched up the liquor bottle from the piano and brought it down like a club across Jorrum's head. He put sufficient strength into the blow to get results. The bottle shattered against Sugar Babe's cranium, and the man folded like an accordion.

Steadying himself on his feet, Johnny Winfield carefully set the bottleneck back on the piano and faced the three Jorrum men. That the drunken stupefaction in their eyes was changing to flaming anger did not seem to faze him.

'You men can take a message to Blaze Jorrum for me," Johnny said. "Tell him his nephew's in jail on a killin' charge. There won't be any bail, but there'll be a fair trial. Now yuh better get goin'."

They did. Like a pride of ravening lions they flung themselves upon the intrepid young sheriff. As he went down fighting under their combined attack Flora Drake, shoved savagely against the piano in their rush, screamed for help. Mark Croyden, the kingpin of the Cowboy's Retreat, was on his feet signaling barmen and bouncers to the scene of the riot. But it was not, oddly enough, to her employer that Flora Drake was appealing.

"Morgan!" she cried out despairingly. "Wayne Morgan! Help!"

The stranger, no longer inconspicuous, was already running toward the fracas with might strides. . . .

A MAN like Wayne Morgan, whose life was crammed full of other men's affairs, was bound by the law of averages to be on hand occasionally when trouble broke out. But Morgan's presence in Mesquite when Johnny Winfield jumped four Jorrum Creek men was no accident. Fate had started putting the jigsaw puzzle parts together one day previous when a magnificent black stallion called Midnight cast a shoe.

Wayne Morgan. Just another name, just another man who wandered in restless, aimless fashion about frontier country. But this careless cowboy was far more than he seemed. As Wayne Morgan, a name not even his true one, he was whatever it suited him at the moment to be—drifter, working cowboy, bronc buster, field laborer, clerk, miner, gambler. It didn't matter so long as he led a more or less anonymous existence.

For Wayne Morgan was the alter ego of the Masked Rider, that nameless black-clad man who rode the big demon horse Midnight and who fought like a madman for the unjustly downtrodden and the underdog. Known the length and breadth of the West as the Robin Hood outlaw, the Masked Rider was patron saint of the oppressed, guardian angel of the weak, scourge of the lawless, and Nemesis of the evil-doer untouched or unreachable by legal justice.

Naturally, many crimes had been committed in the Masked Rider's name until there was a price on his head in several parts of the country. But the sorely tried people of a dozen states and territories knew him for their champion. Outlawed though he was, they knew he defended the weak against the ruthless strong, delivered the helpless from the injustice of the powerful, appeared out of nowhere to strike in behalf of the righteous, only to disappear as magically as he had come.

Traps had been set for him by the score, strategems arranged by overzealous lawmen and frantic desperadoes alike. Thanks to the rôle of Wayne Morgan and the constant alertness of his one faithful companion, the Masked Rider remained free to roam the range in the cause of justice. No one knew the heroic, lonely Robin Hood outlaw save Blue Hawk, a stalwart Yaqui Indian, and graduate of mission school, who had long ago dedicated his life to following the fortunes of this Good Samaritan of the six-shooter.

They had been traveling south, these two friends, along the back trails with their little remuda of horses—spare mounts and pack animals—when the black stallion threw his shoe. Blue Hawk was riding the magnificent steed at the time, his patron still mounted on the huge, rangy gray he had ridden to stop by the crossroads settlement of Pawpaw earlier in the day for supplies. The Indian promptly dismounted and looked at the stallion's off front hoof. He walked over and retrieved the shoe which he examined critically. He held it up for Wayne Morgan's inspection.

"See, Senor," he said. "Senor" was the only name by which he ever called his

companion of the trails. "It has worn very thin. I doubt if I can put it back so it will hold, but I'll try. We have no spare shoes of Midnight's size in the supply pack."

"Never mind, Hawk," Morgan said in his pleasant baritone, an altogether different voice from the gruff bass he used as the Masked Rider. "I noticed there was a smithy at the cross roads. You make camp for the night near here and I'll take Midnight back to Pawpaw."

"As you say, Senor," the Indian agreed. "But I can ride one of the other horses back for shoes if you don't want it known you are in this part of the country."

"It don't matter. We'll be a hundred miles beyond here by tomorrow night."

Morgan had swung down and, opening a saddle-roll, had taken from it a black sombrero, black mask, and black riding cloak. Doffing his gray Stetson, he was soon cloaked and masked in the somber garb. When he stepped up astride the coal-black stallion it was amazing how quickly and thoroughly he had been transformed into the sinister figure of ebony hue that struck terror into the hearts of evil schemers and vicious outlaws.

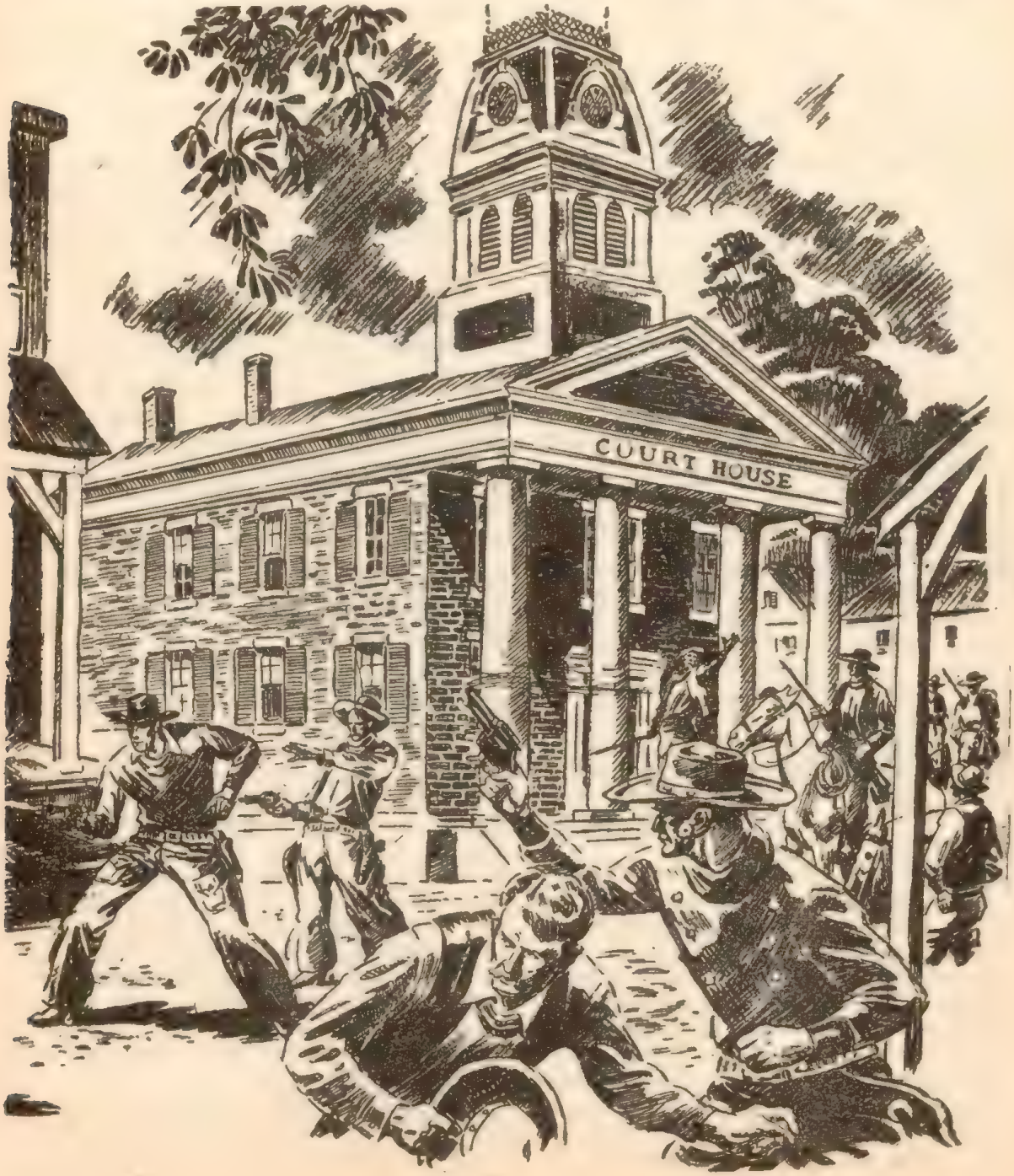
Lifting one arm in farewell to the Indian, he set off across country in a mile-eating canter in spite of his steed's missing shoe. Blue Hawk, pride and affection in his black eyes, watched him out of sight. Then he turned his little band of horses away from the trail and drove

A band of horsemen, led by a black-clad masked man, came thundering into the fight (CHAP. XIV)

them down to the bank of a creek where he methodically set up a compact camp which could be struck at a moment's notice.

THE Masked Rider reached the cross-road settlement before sundown. Having already been here during the late morning as Wayne Morgan, and knowing the lay of the land, he rode boldly into the hamlet and on to the large barnlike structure of the smithy. A weather-beaten sign nailed to the big oak tree out front stated that Albert Todd did plain and fancy blacksmithing within.

The ringing sound of sledge on anvil ceased as the black stallion daintily picked his way through the big doorway and halted, to snort at the mingled odors of hot iron, glowing forge, leather, and



burned hoof parings that assailed his nostrils. Albert Todd, a vast man of expansive girth, stood spraddle-legged behind his anvil and stared at the masked apparition apprehensively while the metal part on which he had been pounding cooled from cherry-red to dull crimson.

"Good afternoon, friend," the Masked Rider greeted in his gruff tones. "Can I trouble yuh to shoe my hoss? Midnight has cast his off front shoe, but it's time he was reshod all around. It'll be a cash transaction."

"Midnight?" Todd rumbled, his eyes flicking over the great stallion and then returning to the rider's masked face. Recognition dawned in his eyes and a slow, wide smile ate up his ruddy countenance. "So you're the Masked Rider? I've heard lots about yuh, most of which likely ain't so, but I never figgered to lay eyes on yuh. Light down. O' course I'll shoe Midnight for yuh."

"Twenty-ounce shoes, if yuh've got 'em in his size," the Masked Rider added, dismounting and turning Midnight over to the smith. "Behave yoreself, boy."

Todd took charge of the big horse with an ease that bespoke familiarity with and love for animals. While the intelligent stallion, that usually permitted no human save his master and Blue Hawk to touch him, stood passive under his handling, the blacksmith measured him for shoes. Finding a set of the right weight, Todd thrust a pair of them into the bed of coals on the forge and began working his bellows. He started working his lungs at the same time.

"These are the weight, and I'll shape 'em to fit exactly," he said conversationally. "I suppose the brewin' trouble over at the county seat is what brings yuh to this section."

"Trouble?" the Masked Rider repeated.

"Well, I don't reckon you'd call it more'n a ripple on the sea of strife, alongside the troubles yuh've seen in yore time, but for my money I'd say things is buildin' up to a first-class explosion. And seein' you here all of a sudden makes me plumb shore I'm right."

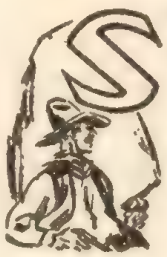
He plucked a shoe out of the coals with a pair of tongs, eyed it, and thrust it back. Straddling one of Midnight's forelegs, his broad rear to the horse's shoulder, he gripped the hoof tight between his knees and began removing the old shoe with a pair of cutter tongs preparatory to trimming the hoof itself.

The Masked Rider seated himself on a nail keg with his back to the wall, out of sight of casual passers-by and where he could keep an eye on front and back entrances, and watched the smith at his work.

"Go ahead and tell it to me yore way," he invited. "I'm a good listener."

CHAPTER III

The Blacksmith's Story



SUCH an invitation was all Albert Todd needed. Having the gift of gab, he talked as he worked, without slighting either job.

"It rightly begun, I reckon," he said, "back in the Fifties when the Jorrums settled along the creek that's got their name. That's over east of here and north of Mesquite, and when Mesquite wasn't as big as Pawpaw. But we can't go back into old-time history to pin down the beginnin's of some things. So I'd say the present trouble started about three months ago when Tom Baylor—he was the sheriff of Hackamore County at the time— rode up into Jorrum Creek country to ask about a strayed cow belongin' to Bill Haglin.

"You have to know the Jorrums to understand what happened, and why things was handled as they was. Old Blaze Jorrum, the head of the Jorrum clan ever since his ma, Aunt Betsy Jorrum, was killed about twenty years ago fightin' Injuns, is a ring-tailed hellion. He rules Jorrum Creek and runs Jorrum men about the way Jorrum men lord it over the rest of this country. They don't own any land outside of their section, they ain't rich, they don't control banks or politics, but they're proud and mean. Nobody ever caught any Jorrum boys stealin' or rustlin', but they're always in a fracas or a shootin' scrape over somethin' or other."

"I get what yuh mean," agreed the Masked Rider. "Without bein' outlaws, they're tough hombres. Without controllin' politics or wealth, they're strong

enough and plentiful enough to ride roughshod over the rights and wishes of others."

"I see yuh know 'em," said the blacksmith. "Well, as long as they stick around mainly to Jorrum Creek and don't get too cantankerous on public roads and in town, it don't pay other folks to tangle with 'em. It works out better to let the Jorrums run their bluff over other folks. Nobody can sue 'em and get anythin'. If they got judgment they wouldn't dare go up on Jorrum Creek and try to collect. To stand up four-square and not give a Jorrum more'n half the road or fair turn and fair play only gets a gunfight. There ain't any percentage in that. The Jorrums are the best gunslingers on this range.

"But to tell yuh what happened to Tom Baylor. Tom was a prudent man and a good sheriff. He didn't bother things that was better left undisturbed. He walked soft and talked soft when he was on the wrong side of the street. He didn't have a warrant when he rode up to Sugar Babe Jorrum's house to ask questions. I figger he didn't mean to rile Sugar Babe nohow. But it was just one of them misunderstandin's that can happen. Mebbe both Tom and Sugar Babe was out of sorts that mornin'. Anyway, Sugar Babe didn't feel like talkin' and he stopped the sheriff with a shotgun, tellin' him not to come any closer to the house. He figgered the sheriff would stop, and the sheriff figgered Sugar Babe wouldn't shoot. They was both wrong."

Having finished preparing Midnight's hoofs, the blacksmith returned to forge and anvil to shape the shoes. Temporarily his story was discontinued. The Masked Rider waited in patience. Then, between shoes, Todd finished his story.

"I reckon yuh heard the killin' of Sheriff Baylor was the last straw for the riled citizens. That they rose up, formed posses, and started carryin' war to the Jorrum Creekers. That's probably what brought you here, ain't it? Yuh came to stop the massacre and bring peace? Well, that ain't what happened a-tall."

"Has anything happened?" the Masked Rider felt constrained to inquire.

"The pot's a-boilin'," Todd assured him. "But she's goin' to boil over in the opposite direction. Tom Baylor was as much in the wrong as Sugar Babe Jorrum. So the townfolks and the range folks thought better'n to take things up. Howsomever, the office of sheriff was now vacant, and Mark Croyden—he's a sharp business man and trader of Mesquite—figgered that somebody quiet and easy-goin' ought to be appointed to finish out Baylor's term, somebody who wouldn't make no more trouble with the Jorrums. So him and Judge Ben Garvey picked out a good dummy sheriff who'd fill the bill and be smart enough to keep his nose clean.

"Everybody thought it was a joke when Croyden picked out his own piano player at the dance hall and then smooth-talked the judge into makin' him sheriff. Johnny Winfield's just a button, not much more'n of age. A more unlikely choice for any kind of gun-totin' job, even as a figgerhead sheriff, couldn't have been found."

THE blacksmith broke off his narrative to point at one of Midnight's hoofs he had just trimmed for a final fitting.

"Look here, Masked Rider. See that reddish streak in the whitish grain close to the frog? That's the same as a corn to a man. Ought to be treated."

"Of course," the Masked Rider said, looking at the upturned hoof as he caressed the stallion's velvety muzzle. "Go ahead and burn the spot with a hot iron. Midnight will stand like a soldier."

The blacksmith nodded, pleased at the masked man's quick knowledge, and seared the sensitive spot with the hot shoe. When he got around to nailing the shoe on he resumed his story.

"I don't know how to tell yuh about Johnny Winfield. He's sort of maverick, an orphan kid who just grew up around Mesquite. A woman named Flora Drake—she's run Croyden's dance hall for years—took an interest in him, finally gettin' him a job in the dance hall. Johnny's a natural born musician, a piano-playin' fool. I've heard him play many a time. He's a dreamer, a quiet sort, the last feller yuh'd think would stick his nose in where it wasn't wanted. Everybody figgered a couple of tough deputies would have to be appointed to run the office and keep order in town.

"But somethin' went haywire. Pinnin' a badge on Johnny and handin' him a pair of new six-shooters done somethin'

to him. Overnight he changed from a peaceful piano player to a gamecock. Folks don't know yet how to take him. But they're learnin' to take him plenty serious. He's got tough as a buzz saw and reckless as a fool. He started slappin' ruckus-raisin' citizens over the head and clappin' 'em in jail. There wasn't any point in suggestin' to him that he ought to appoint a couple of gun deputies. He started cleanin' up the town by himself. But that wasn't the half of it.

"He declared war on the Jorrums. He's already jugged a couple of Jorrum hands for bein' drunk and disorderly in town. He pistol-whipped Ike Jorrum when he caught him bullyin' that half-witted hostler at Murphy's livery barn a week later. And worst of all, he said the Baylor business wasn't settled. He wasn't goin' to let it die like that. The Jorrums was goin' to have to send somebody to stand trial for the killin', justified or not, in order to get it off the records as an example to other folks. Johnny said the Jorrums had to behave and obey laws just like everybody else."

"Which seems reasonable enough," commented the Masked Rider.

"Shore," said Mr. Todd, snorting as he clinched the last nail of the fourth shoe and released the stallion's hoof. "Only the Jorrums don't like it. What I mean is they're gettin' boilin' mad. They'll likely ride down on the county seat at the next move Johnny Winfield makes and shoot up the town. The townsfolks ain't able to tame their new sheriff down—in fact, they don't even know yet just how wild he will get—and they're plenty shore of the bloody outcome of a Jorrum raid. So everybody's sort of waitin' around breathless."

"How about this Mark Croyden?" the Masked Rider asked, arising and reaching under his cloak for a small black buckskin money-bag. "Can't he control his puppet?"

"I think Croyden's got a tiger by the tail," was the blacksmith's candid opinion. "He can't go to Judge Garvey and get his own man fired just for doin' a first-rate duty as sheriff—so far. . . . I usually charge a dollar six-bit for a shoein' job this size."

"Here's a five-dollar gold piece, Mr. Todd," said the Masked Rider. "Believe me, it's been worth it. And thanks for yore story."

He mounted Midnight and rode out of the shop into the deepening dusk.

"Hey!" Albert Todd called, striding heavily after him. "If yuh're goin' over to Mesquite to keep that law-drunk Johnny Winfield from proddin' old Blaze Jorrum into open war yuh might better talk to Flora Drake. Everybody knows she's sweet on the young idiot. If anybody can do anything with him she can."

"Thanks again," said the Masked Rider, lifting a black-gauntleted hand in farewell gesture. "It sounds as though Johnny Winfield needs help and don't know it."

He shook the reins gently, and the magnificent stallion leaped into motion, thundering down the darkening road at a mad gallop, to fling himself into the arms of gathering night.

Albert Todd scratched his grizzled chest as he stared after him.

"I ain't yet figgered out just who needs the help," he reflected, "but I'm bettin' somebody gets it."

What he could not know was that his own story was responsible for Wayne Morgan being in Croyden's dance hall at the moment Flora Drake needed help—and got it. . . .

FLORA hadn't time to call Wayne Morgan's name again before he was springing upon the low dais. He reached into the tangled mass of flying arms and legs and pulled a huge Jorrum Creek man around. It was Little Mitch. As the fellow was jerked about he reached savagely for the interferer. Morgan brought a short, mighty blow up from his chest to jaw before the Jorrum man could get set, stepping under it to impart lifting power.

The resultant sock snapped the man's chin up and Little Mitch took three or four drunken steps backward, to fall off the dais and crash to the floor. Wasting no time to follow up his advantage, Morgan turned and reached for another antagonist. He got Big Mitch this time, catching him by one flailing boot.

Tugging mightily, Morgan tore him loose bodily from the fray and dragged him clear. Twisting and writhing like a cat, Big Mitch caught up the piano stool in passing and hurled it up at his captor, a dexterous feat of strength.

Morgan released the fellow's ankle and dodged. The flying stool clipped his left shoulder and glanced off, the force of the blow was so great that his entire arm went numb from the shock of it. Big Mitch scrambled to his feet and lunged at the meddler, roaring with rage. Fighting for time, Morgan met his attack by placing his foot against Mitchell's chest and shoving heartily. Big Mitch shot backward off the dais to slide in one direction on his rump while his brother returned to the fight from another and leaped upon Morgan's back.

Swiftly Morgan reached for a one-handed neck hold and bent forward in a heave that brought Little Mitch over his back in a sort of flying mare. The Jorrum Creeker crashed into the wall of the stair landing beside the piano and dropped to the floor. The strength slowly returning to his left arm, Morgan turned to complete the rescue of Johnny Winfield.

Bearcat Mahoney, laughing steadily in his whispering fashion, sounding like a steam radiator stuttering at full blast, was sprawled all over his smaller and lighter antagonist, systematically punching the sheriff's head with one fist and then the other. Johnny was gamely fighting back, but he was clearly getting the worst of the pummeling. One eye was puffed half shut, his lower lip was cut and bleeding, his cheek was lacerated, and there was an ugly purpling bruise on his forehead.

Morgan bent over, grabbed Mahoney by the collar and belt and jerked him to his feet. The fellow snarled and swung a haymaker at Morgan with the same speed and dexterity Big Mitch had shown. Weary of the fray, Morgan blocked the blow with his aching left shoulder and brought up his own right fist in a terrific counterblow from near his knees.

This proved to be the most solid blow of the entire fracas. It sounded like the *thwock* of an ax against the bole of a tree, actually lifting the heavy Bearcat off his feet and dumping him squarely before the charging Big Mitch who had arisen from the floor with splinters stinging the seat of his pants.

Big Mitch, bellowing with rage and pain, fell across Bearcat's inert form. Before he could scramble again to his feet Flora Drake snatched the bottle neck from the piano top and was on her knees on his back pressing the jagged points of the broken glass against the nape of his thick, ugly neck.

"Freeze, you buzzard!" she warned savagely. "Or I'll pin you to the floor like a bug!"

CHAPTER IV

Cross Currents?

BIG MITCH ceased his clamor and relaxed as completely as a noisy dog under the touch of his master's hand. Bearcat Mahoney, being as completely out of the fight as Sugar Babe Jorrum, Morgan turned grimly to give the fourth member of the tough quartet his quietus. Little Mitch had already climbed to his feet against the base of the stair landing. He had drawn a hunting knife from somewhere about his

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clothing and, just as Morgan looked around, he leaped, raising the weapon to strike down this rough-and-tumble meddler.

But the slender and wiry Johnny Winfield had also managed to get to his feet. Swaying unsteadily, he at last drew his left-hand gun. He had lost the other in the sharp scuffle. He swayed forward as Little Mitch was leaping past him, bringing the six-shooter up and around in a sort of roundhouse swing.

The barrel *clunked* squarely against Little Mitch's forehead. With a faint groan Little Mitch kept on moving forward. But he wasn't leaping now; he was falling.

Johnny Winfield shifted his gun to his right hand, blinked his eyes, and shook his head to clear it. Then he raised the gun like a hatchet for a chopping blow to finish the job.

"Take it easy, Sheriff," Morgan counseled as he deftly twisted aside to let the last Jorrum Creeker hit the floor unimpeded. "Yuh can cave a fellow's head in with a club like that."

He dropped to one knee beside Little Mitch, grasping his right wrist and pinioning the arm up behind the man's back while he neatly removed the knife.

The hot glow in Johnny's eyes began to die away. He looked around sheepishly, saw his other gun, picked it up.

"Thanks for the helpin' hand, mister," he acknowledged, serious and unsmiling. "I'd had a pretty rough time if it hadn't been for you."

"A pretty rough time?" exclaimed Flora Drake, beginning to tremble where she knelt on Big Mitch's broad back. "These toughs would have killed you! As it is, they've beaten you into a pulp."

She elicited a faint "Please, lady," from the quiescent brute beneath her as the jagged points of glass danced a deadly jig against his neck. He was a ludicrous sight, lying there with his big nose pressed to the floor.

"Not quite," Johnny answered the woman in a quiet voice, and there wasn't the least bit of braggadocio in his manner. "But I was afraid I'd have to shoot a couple of 'em."

Wayne Morgan stepped over and assisted the woman to her feet.

"Lie still, you!" he sternly ordered Big Mitch as he removed the jagged glass weapon. And to the dance hall hostess: "I reckon Johnny and I both owe yuh plenty, Miss Drake, and I'm thankin' yuh, ma'am."

She did not answer this, but her gray-green eyes flashed him a looked of grateful acknowledgement for his own timely assistance.

By this time several employees and swampers had tardily gathered. They stood, hesitant, around the dais and looked up at Mark Croyden for instructions like chickens awaiting feed. Their master did not fail them.

"Take these four men over to Winelow's office for patching up," he ordered in his calm, deliberate voice. "Tell Doc to charge it to me. Courtesy of the Cowboy's Retreat. Then get them on their horses and see them safely to the edge of town."

"Hold on there, Mr. Croyden," Johnny objected. "I've already arrested Jorrum, and I'm thinkin' now about juggin' the rest of 'em."

Croyden, his long, lean face inscrutable, gazed down upon his former piano player. This was the first open difference between them. It was the sheriff maker's first encroachment on his puppet's domain and the sheriff's first challenge of that trespass. Everybody wondered what the outcome would be, and how it was going to affect the future of Hackamore County.

"I know, Johnny," Croyden admitted in a gentle voice, "but I also know you're too smart to try to make it stick. You've already made it plain to Jorrum Creek—and to the rest of us—that the new sheriff is on the job. Let me be the first man to praise you for it. But you know what will happen if you go through with this arrest? The Jorrums will explode. It would be worse than an Indian uprising."

MORGAN could see the young fellow's bruised face go white and strained-looking. There was a kind of hollow expression—maybe it was a look of hunger or desperation—in his eyes. At any rate, there was a dogged determination about him as he replied.

"That's their privilege I reckon, Mr. Croyden. I'm willin' to drop charges against these three brawlers, but Sugar Babe Jorrum goes to jail. Mebbe the court'll call it manslaughter, and mebbe

the jury'll turn him loose, but meantime I'm holdin' him."

"You know you're acting a colossal fool," Croyden said patiently. "You're touching a lighted match to a powder train. Old Blaze Jorrum will come raging into town after his nephew. A lot of people will get hurt. You don't want that, do you?"

"Sugar Babe Jorum killed Tom Baylor," Johnny stated flatly.

"That's true. If you insist on bringing him to trial for it that can be peaceably arranged. Let him go now, and I'll guarantee he can be persuaded to answer a court summons. We'll get him to appear voluntarily in court without further bloodshed over the unfortunate affair."

Johnny Winfield believed in putting facts bluntly. "Yuh mean," he said, "that yuh're askin' me—or tellin' me—to turn my back on my plain duty. Yuh mean yuh're afraid to let the law bring justice because Jorrum Creekers might not like it."

"Of course not!" Croyden cut him off more sharply than he had yet spoken. "I don't intend your making a jackass of yourself. I want you to handle things in a sensible way that won't endanger other people. You can get Judge Garvey to issue a bench warrant for Sugar Babe Jorrum which . . . Oh, this is no place to talk things over, Johnny. Come! We'll go upstairs to my office!"

"Never mind," the sheriff said stonily. "Go ahead and be a chicken-livered coward. Let him go scot free!"

He jammed his six-shooters into their holsters, picked up his trampled hat and slapped it once against his knee to shake dust and glass fragments from it, clapped it on his head, and walked blindly toward the batwings and out onto the street. Morgan saw as he passed that his eyes were filled with tears, whether of anger, sorrow, or humiliation the roving cowboy could not tell.

"Oh, Johnny, Johnny!" moaned the woman in a low, anxious voice.

"Leave him be," Morgan advised her softly. "I'm goin' to follow him up directly. I'll talk to yuh again later."

Big Mitch got to his feet and, after seeing that his three companions were being properly attended by the house employees, turned to the man who had busted up the shindig with the sheriff.

"What might yore name be, feller?" he asked without particular animosity.

Morgan, his mind on Johnny Winfield and Mark Croyden, was almost curt. "It might be anything. Does it matter?"

"Not to me," admitted Big Mitch, "but Blaze Jorrum'll shore want to know the name of the man he'll have to run down."

Morgan discounted this implied threat as he met the other man's gaze levelly. "In that case, the name is Wayne Morgan, and yuh can tell Blaze Jorrum if he hurries he won't have to run far. I'll be here in Mesquite for a spell."

Big Mitch nodded. He glanced askance at the woman and rubbed his neck tenderly.

"Then mebbe I can have another go at yuh myself—some time when there ain't female interferin'. We can settle this thing. I ain't never been licked at fair and square rough-and-tumble fightin'."

A whispering laugh sounded from the edge of the dais. Bearcat Mahoney was sitting up and rubbing his jaw.

"Yuh won't never finish that fight with this hairpin, Mitch," he prophesied.

"Why not?" Big Mitch demanded in instant truculence.

"Because," said Mahoney, and his voice dripped cold venom, "I'm goin' to cut his heart out next time I meet up with him."

Little Mitch and Sugar Babe Jorrum still had nothing to say. They remained unconscious and were being carried that way from the Cowboy's Retreat to Dr. Winelow's office. Bearcat Mahoney, about to get to his feet and follow, started at the thudding sound just before him. He looked with widened eyes at Little Mitch's hunting knife quivering in the floor not two inches from his knee.

"There's a frog sticker that belongs to yore bunch," drawled Morgan. "Mebbe yuh'd like to make a stab at it now."

Big Mitch roared with laughter. "I shore admire a man with a sense of humor. Throw in yore hand, Bearcat. Yuh've been called."

MAHONEY sourly worked the knife free and then got slowly to his feet. He didn't see anything funny, and he did see that Morgan's right hand swung free just over the butt of the holstered .45 at his thigh.

"We'll wait and do what Sugar Babe says," he grunted. "And I'm tellin' yuh now, Morgan, you and that sheriff squirt have staked out a full claim of trouble. Come on, Mitch."

The two Jorrum Creek men made off after their carried companions. Morgan was watching them through the batwings before returning his attention to the woman beside him when she spoke.

"You and Johnny will have to be careful. That Mahoney is dangerous."

"I'd say there's not much choice between that pair, ma'am," he told her. "Two polecats with just a little difference in their style of manners."

"Ahem!" said a dry voice from the landing, and Morgan raised his gaze to the slender figure of Mark Croyden. "You're pretty handy with your fists, Morgan."

"I'm fair," Morgan admitted. "Johnny did a better job with a whisky bottle and a gun barrel."

"I'm curious as to why Flora called on you for help," Croyden pursued. "You two old friends?"

"We are now." Morgan forestalled any further questioning on that score. "Nothin' like a Donnybrook to get folks acquainted. Any objections?"

A shadow crossed Mark Croyden's face. "Being a stranger, you don't know it, but this fracas will prove far more serious than a Donnybrook Fair. You said you intended tarrying in Mesquite. Take my advice and don't. The Jorrums are much too many for you. You wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance."

"It sounded sort of sensible to me—the advice yuh gave the sheriff," Morgan drawled, fishing in his pockets for the makings. He drew forth tobacco sack and papers and leisurely built himself a cigarette as he went on. "But when yuh keep passin' the same advice on to everybody else, Mr. Croyden, she begins to look funny. Just whose side are yuh on? An unthinkin' man, now, would get a notion yuh're in cahoots with the Jorrums."

The owner of the house did not take umbrage at this open thrust. He looked without visible change of expression at the still distraught dance hostess and back again.

"Go on," he said, his voice soft.

Morgan shrugged. "Nowhere to go, Mr. Croyden. It's just open talk that you picked Johnny Winfield for sheriff yoreself. I'm only sayin' it looks funny for yuh to start crossin' him in the doin' of his duty, Mr. Croyden. Yuh seem to want everybody to sidestep the Jorrums. I don't think Johnny's right about yuh bein' scared. So what is there left to think, Mr. Croyden?"

"You can stop calling me Mr. Croyden," was the gloomy response. "Frankenstein is more appropriate."

"Meaning what?" Morgan asked blankly, pretending not to understand the allusion.

"I've created a monster," Croyden said, and sighed heavily.

Flora Drake looked up quickly. "Then it's true," she began, gradually working herself into a furious passion. "So it was you, Mark Croyden! You're the one who turned Johnny from a sweet kid into a fire-breathing lawdog. You're to blame for changing that boy into a reckless gun-toter who doesn't know how crazy he's acting. You'll be responsible for what happens to him. You have—"

"Shut up, Flora!" Croyden grated out in a harsh tone, startling her into silence. Then, more mildly: "I only did what I thought best for all concerned. How was I to know I was going to oversell the young fool when I pointed out his attributes for the sheriff's job? I . . . Oh, come along with me, both of you. We'll go up to my office and talk this out. I'm beginning to have an idea how this might be handled."

The woman was crying openly now. "You—you'll get him killed. I never thought you'd cross me up like this, Mark. You—you . . . The least you could have done was—was to talk with me about it first. You—you've moved him out just like one of your pawns and now there's nothing I can do to—to save him."

WAYNE MORGAN put his arm in comforting fashion about her shaking shoulders. With his other hand he gently raised her chin until he could look into her eyes.

"You love Johnny, don't you?" he said.

She nodded without speaking, biting her nether lip in a pretty agony of grief. A dance hall hostess verging on middle age and a young pup of a piano player who

had suddenly taken on a strut of importance.

It was not the first time Morgan had run across such an odd shuffling of the cards of love. Who was he to pass on who should experience the tender passion for whom? Who was he to judge what was true love and what only a physical attraction or a mere fleeting fancy?

"Look, Flora," he suggested, "you go chew the fat with yore boss, huh? Somebody ought to accept his invitation to see how his office is painted. I'll have to take him up later."

"What are you going to do?" she asked anxiously as he stepped back.

Morgan grinned boyishly. "I've sort of taken a shine to this locoed lad of yores. I think I'd better trail after Johnny until those Jorrum Creek jugheads leave town."

"That," said Mark Croyden, placing his elbows on the railing and leaning over to speak confidentially, "was exactly the idea I had. How about a job as the sheriff's special deputy, Morgan? A man like you ought to keep Johnny out of trouble. I could make it worth your while."

CHAPTER V

Deputy Sheriff

QUITE a few little points stuck out in Wayne Morgan's mind like snagged threads in a piece of silk. What was eating Johnny Winfield that made a firecracker out of an otherwise peaceful piano player? What business had brought Sugar Babe Jorrum and his three cohorts to town in the first place? Had they taken the trouble to ride down from Jorrum Creek and raise a drunken rumpus merely to challenge the new sheriff, a sort of test to see if Johnny would really push the Baylor matter any further?

Such arrant insolence didn't fit the Jorrum character as Morgan understood it. They considefed the Baylor incident closed. They wouldn't take the pains to lord it over other men for the mere sake of effrontery.

Then why was Sugar Babe Jorrum in Mesquite? And, finally, what had caused Mark Croyden to reverse himself, offering a special deputy job after first warning the cowboy drifter to leave town? However, first things first.

He found Johnny in the office of the one-storied adobe jail bathing his bruised and swollen features in a tin pan of cold water. The jailer, a short and extremely heavy-set man whose pot belly was encircled by a wide and thick leather belt, stood near, holding a towel.

Morgan swung a battered chair around, straddled it, and rested his forearms on the unpainted, hand-polished back bow, preparatory to digging information out of the young sheriff. Johnny glanced at him as he reached for the towel.

"Thanks, Walt," he said briefly, patting his face gingerly to dry it. "Better go see about supper for what prisoners yuh got."

Walter Gimp glanced curiously at Morgan and took the hint.

"Oh, shore, shore," he wheezed. "See yuh later, Johnny."

He waddled out on his way to the restaurant. Morgan remained silent.

"Well, what d'yuh want?" Johnny said in a sullen voice. "Pay for what yuh did?"

"I might could use it," Morgan answered, grinning. "If a job went with it."

"Fat lot of use I have for a deputy," Johnny said bitterly. "I can't even arrest a killer."

Morgan soberly shook his head. "There's a lot more to sheriffin' Johnny, than just arrestin' folks. I know. I've been a deputy sheriff before."

Johnny looked at him with a faint quickening of interest. When he did not speak, Morgan went on:

"How about an explanation, pardner? What's eatin' yuh?"

"What d'yuh mean?"

"Yuh put up a sizable rumpus for one little man against four overgrown ruffians while ago. Don't tell me you jump up a bunch like that just for exercise. What's the idea?"

"Sugar Babe Jorrum killed the last sheriff. Mebbe it's only manslaughter, but he hasn't answered for it yet."

"I understand that part," Morgan assured him, "but it don't explain yore recklessness. What makes you so foolhardy?"

Johnny's lips tightened in resentment. Then, in desperate need of a confidant, he answered:

"I got to show a certain man."

"What?" Morgan prompted. "That yuh're a brave but senseless lawman?"

"No! That I'm good enough for him."

"Croyden?"

"Of course not! *He* talked me into takin' this job. It's Judge Garvey."

"Garvey? The county judge who appointed you?"

"Yeah. He's Robin O'Neal's guardian. She—she's my girl. He said I wasn't good enough to tip my hat to her, much less be makin' up to her. He got awful mad that day I asked him. He called me a cheap piano player for a tinhorn dance hall. He—oh, he said plenty. I had to take it because Robin was sittin' there in the buggy and—and because it was true. That was the week after Tom Baylor got killed. Just before I was made sheriff. That's why I got to show the judge I'm all right even if I am an orphan who grew up around Mark Croyden's saloon."

"Wait a minute!" Morgan protested. "Let's have the story in the right order. How did Judge Garvey come to appoint yuh to finish out Baylor's term if that's what he thought about yuh?"

Johnny Winfield tossed the towel aside and sat down on the end of a table facing Morgan.

Having decided to tell this sympathetic new friend his woes, he opened up and did a thorough job of it.

Morgan gathered that Johnny and Robin had grown up together. At least, Johnny had grown up around Mesquite with no especial care save what he had had from Flora Drake and Mark Croyden, the only two people who had taken much of a friendly interest in him. Flora, a great old girl, had been instrumental in teaching Johnny the rudiments of music on the piano and then had got the lad his job with her boss when he developed into a natural born piano player.

ROBIN O'NEIL, now a laughing-eyed, black-haired Irish colleen of eighteen, had come when she was ten to live on the Raftered G Ranch of her guardian beyond Pawpaw out west of the county seat. The two youngsters had been thrown together off and on in school and in other small town ways, and had fallen in love.

This, Morgan reflected, played the devil with Flora Drake's romance, but that was just how affairs of the heart went sometimes.

On the momentous day in question Robin had been sitting in the judge's buggy in front of the bank across the street from the Cowboy's Retreat. Johnny, happening to see her out there, had run over to talk with her. Somehow the conversation got quite personal and tender, and Johnny had learned for the first time that Robin loved him as completely as he loved her.

JUDGE GARVEY had come out of the bank and stopped short in anger at sight of the piano player sitting in his buggy and holding hands with his ward. Before he got around to bawling out the brash lad, Johnny asked if he could pay suit for Robin's hand, now that he had a steady job.

The resultant fireworks had reduced the girl to tears, sent Johnny slinking back to the Cowboy's Retreat in deep mortification, and sent Judge Garvey driving furiously down the street.

From his office window Mark Croyden had witnessed the entire incident. Smitten with an idea, he had called Johnny upstairs to see him.

Croyden's idea had been to have Johnny appointed sheriff so, as he said, the young fellow would have a dignified political office and the right to consider himself on a social level sufficiently exalted to call on the judge's ward. He talked Johnny into the idea and then proceeded to talk Judge Garvey into making the appointment. How he put this one over on the judge nobody could figure out, but Mark Croyden toted a lot of water in Mesquite.

Trying to dig down into Croyden's possible ulterior motives by his astute questioning of Johnny, Morgan surmised that Croyden wanted his own hand-picked dummy in office for any and all good Johnny could do him, while Judge Garvey was persuaded to make the appointment because he was chary of appointing any two-fisted gun-slinger who might agitate further trouble on Jorrum Creek. Whatever the reasons each man

may have had for his part in the business of sheriff making, Johnny had fooled everybody.

He hadn't made any social progress with Judge Garvey as yet, but in a little less than three months he had set the town by the ears and had prodded and goaded the Jorrum Creek inhabitants almost to the exploding point, winding up with today's episode wherein he had darned near slapped the killer of the former sheriff in jail for murder.

It was no wonder Albert Todd, the blacksmith, had told the Masked Rider that he thought Croyden had a tiger by the tail.

"So that's why I got to keep drivin' myself," Johnny finished tersely. "I got to prove to Judge Garvey I'm a man and a first-rate sheriff and not just a cheap piano player. Neither Mr. Croyden or you or anybody is goin' to stop me from gettin' Robin O'Neil!"

"I see," said Morgan gravely. "What are yore plans now?"

The young sheriff, surprised at getting no argument, looked a bit nonplussed at this simple query.

"I—I don't know," he admitted.

"Then I'll make a suggestion," Morgan said. "I'd say yuh ought to go straight from here to Judge Garvey as yore superior, and lay this matter before him. Do it before somebody does it their way. And, as yore deputy, I could go along with yuh to sort of back yuh up."

Johnny stared at him for a long moment. Then he got up and went around to his desk where he fished in a drawer. He handed Morgan a slightly brassy deputy badge.

"All right," he said. "You're hired. Let's go."

The county courthouse was a two-story red brick building on the front of the same big lot on which was situated the adobe jail. What few county offices there were in existence in Hackamore County were located on the first floor. A fairly wide set of steps midway of the building's front led up to the courtroom where the Judge presided when court was in session.

IN THE front of the upstairs was a suite of law offices where Judge Garvey practised law when he had the time between sessions. Usually he turned most of his cases over to Peebles and Pooney, a law firm in which he was a silent partner. For, between court terms, his ward's estate administration, and his own thriving ranch, the judge's time was well taken up.

Johnny and Morgan found the jurist in his front offices and free. He was gray and thinning of hair, neither fat nor lean, of medium height, quite active, with a benign sort of countenance which was grave in response but readily give to melting into an understanding smile.

Johnny introduced Morgan as his new deputy, and Judge Garvey looked over his gold-rimmed glasses in swift surprise.

"Well," he said, "it's certainly time you put on a deputy, Winfield. In fact, I was going to speak to you about it."

THE clerk from the outer office then stuck his head in at the door and interrupted.

"Beg yore pardon, Judge Garvey," he said apologetically, "but three ranchmen are here to see yuh. I told 'em it's too late for yuh to see 'em tonight, but they said it was urgent business."

The Judge frowned in some annoyance. "Who are they, Melrose?"

"Ralph Geary, Ted Brules, and Bill Haglin. They've been drinkin'."

"I—all right, I'll see them," Judge Garvey decided. "My boy, do you mind waiting in the outer office long enough for me to see these clients? I'll finish with them quickly, and then I want to talk to you."

"Of course not, Judge," Johnny agreed amiably, palpably anxious to please. "Come on, Wayne."

Morgan, the name of Bill Haglin taking root in his curious mind, arose to follow the sheriff's lead. The three ranchers, already filing into the office, overheard most of this conversation. The leader held up his hand.

"Nope, don't go," he said, speaking to Johnny and looking at Morgan with interest. "This here is law business, and we'd just as soon the sheriff heard about it right now. How about it, men?"

"Shore thing, Bill," the pair behind him chorused.

"Very well," Judge Garvey agreed, motioning his callers to chairs.

CHAPTER VI

Land Troubles

MORGAN and Johnny fell back toward one wall and eyed proceedings. It was true that the three ranchmen had been drinking, but they were far from being intoxicated. They looked more like a grievance committee to the new deputy. They were. Their first words rivited his attention.

"We want to know how we can file a land suit against Mark Croyden," Bill Haglin began.

"We been fleeced!" added Ralph Geary in deep anger.

"Rightly, I ain't got any suit against Croyden," Bill Haglin hastened to add, "because I've already completed my deal, which wasn't with Croyden direct anyhow, but after comparin' notes with Ted and Ralph we all seen the whole thing was crooked from start to finish. Judge Garvey, we've been swindled out of all three of our ranches, and we don't aim to stand for it! What we want you to do—"

"It's Ralph and me who'll have to bring the suit, Judge," put in Ted Brules. "We know that, but Bill's deal with old Blaze Jorrum fits right in."

The judge held up both his hands in mild protest.

"Gentlemen," he said. "You'll have to start at the beginning and give me the straight of this. I'll have to understand what you are talking about before I can advise you. Suppose you let one of you be spokesman to tell the story?"

The angry three began nodding in agreement.

"You tell him, Bill," urged the other two.

Haglin agreed, clearing his throat and proceeding to unwind a rather complicated tale of trouble. Before he had finished talking the judge had found a map of the county and had it spread out on his desk where all six men gathered around it intently.

It seemed, as Morgan finally got things clear, that Geary, Brules, and Haglin had owned three big sections of rangeland in the northern part of the county, a wide region between Judge Garvey's own ranch on the west and the Jorrum Creek country to the east. Haglin's place was next to the Jorrum Cerek area, his range constituting a sort of buffer state between the Jorrums and the folks to the west and southwest. Half of the water supply for all three ranches came from Twisted Creek which flowed in a tortuous course southwest across Haglin's ranch, Brules, ranch, and Geary's ranch, in that order.

Twisted Creek was a branch of Jorrum Creek, forking off from Jorrum waters up in the foothills above the settlements of Jorrums along Jorrum Creek but well on the property of old Blaze Jorrum himself. About a month previous Blaze Jorrum had got hold of Bill Haglin and announced his intention of damming off the branch stream up at the fork and throwing all of Twisted Creek into the main channel.

This act, whether strictly legal or not, would have ruined all three ranches west of Jorrum land. They could have fought it in court but, whether the three ranchers won or not, a couple of years' time and the court costs together would have wiped them out.

Casting around for some solution, Brules and Geary had run into Mark Croyden looking at ranch land north of Mesquite but closer to town than their places. He seemed ignorant of the pending disaster to Twisted Creek and when they talked up a possible sale, he took options to purchase on both places at just about bare cost, nothing allowed for improvements.

At the time Brules and Geary had thought they had driven a shrewd bargain, getting out at a loss but not being completely stripped. If, on the other hand, Croyden learned about the Jorrum water cut-off before his ninety-day options expired and refused to take up his options they had a thousand dollars apiece in cash from him that they could use to drill for water or to apply as profit against any forced sale they would yet have to make of their land.

Meanwhile, caught in the same water squeeze, Haglin had sold his place outright to Blaze Jorrum at about the same loss ratio. Whereupon Blaze Jorrum rescinded his orders to dam off Twisted Creek, since there was no point in cutting the main water supply from his own rangeland. Which automatically saved the

Brules place and the Geary ranch from a drought condition. So Brules and Geary rushed back to Mark Croyden and tried to buy off his option, returning his money, then frantically offering him a bonus of several hundred dollars.

IT WAS here they struck a snag. Croyden wouldn't deal. Instead, he told them in no uncertain terms to start packing their personal belongings preparatory to moving off the properties, for he was definitely taking up his options before they expired.

A conference with Bill Haglin convinced all three desperate ranchers that they had been neatly swindled. The prices agreed on for the three places had been nicely calculated to trim the owners without bleeding them white, a sale price too little but enough to keep the victims from hollering. It was obvious that Croyden and Blaze Jorrum had acted in unison, or that Blaze Jorrum—who wasn't reputed to be flush with cash—had acted as a tool for Mark Croyden.

"What we want to know, Judge Garvey," Bill Haglin concluded, "is how we can make Croyden turn loose them options on Ted and Ralph, and how I can get my land back from Jorrum afore he turns it over to Croyden."

"From what you've told me," Judge Garvey answered reluctantly, "there isn't a thing you can do. You have no proof of crookedness or conspiracy. These options are legal and binding on Brules and Geary. I am heartily surprised at Croyden's interest in rangeland. I didn't know he dealt in real estate outside of Mesquite. And, of course, you men were partially to blame in trying to unload your property on Croyden when you thought there was going to be a water shortage."

BLUE HAWK

There were murmurs of objection.

"Yuh can't blame us for tryin' to save our necks, Judge," Brules protested. "It wasn't as if we was tryin' to skin Mark Croyden. He was ridin' around lookin' for rangeland. And, in lookin' back on our talk, I can see he egged us into considerin' an offer. With what we know now by comparin' notes with Haglin here we know it was a swindle game from the start."

Judge Garvey waved his hand to quiet

the indignant uproar, his face lighting up with a sympathetic smile.

"You understand that I am not in accord with these sharp practises because I don't offer you encouragement. You men certainly have my moral support. But that is worth nothing in a court of law. You'll have to show proof of collusion between Croyden and Jorrum to have any chance at all. Tell me, Haglin, what about your cattle stock? Was that included in your ranch sale of five thousand dollars?"

"No, sir. That would of been stealin' me blind for fair. I've moved my stock over on Ralph's and Ted's ranges temporary. I've got to have land and pasturage mighty quick, or I got to sell them cows."

"Don't tell us there ain't nothin' we can do, Judge Garvey," Ralph Geary pleaded earnestly. "Mark Croyden ain't got my place yet. Now that I know he's a swindler and cheat I won't let him set foot on my place. I'll fight him off with a shotgun when he comes to pick up his option."

The judge's sympathetic face grew instantly stern. "Violence won't help matters any in this case, Geary. And in all fairness to Croyden, a man I have little use for, you haven't shown me a clear case of swindle, while you have no legal proof at all. I tell you what I'll do for you. You still have nearly sixty days before these options expire. I don't think Croyden will hurry to do anything for a few weeks. I'll look into the matter and try to figure some loophole for you. I'll put Peebles and Pooney to work on the matter."

The two ranchers became profuse in their thanks and gratitude. Bill Haglin got anxious.

"How about me, Judge Garvey?" he asked. "How am I to get my land back from Blaze Jorrum?"

The judge rubbed his nose vigorously. He removed his glasses and polished the lenses as he went deep in thought.

"I don't know—yet, Haglin," he admitted gravely. "You see, if we could bluff or scare Blaze Jorrum into taking back his money and returning your deed to you—with or without reference to Croyden's possible complicity in the matter—you would be in exactly the same fix you were in originally. Jorrum could shut off water from Twisted Creek, and there you'd be again. Unless Twisted Creek water rights can be worked into the deal. But first we must see where we are with Croyden and Jorrum. Until I can get a report from Abraham Peebles I advise you men to sit tight and do nothing. I'll help you all I can, I promise you that."

IT WAS agreed, and the three disgruntled ranchers left. Judge Garvey folded up his map and turned his attention back to Johnny and Morgan. Morgan remained silent while the sheriff came to the point of his visit without any further delay.

"We're havin' a lot of trouble lately with the Jorrum Creekers, Judge Garvey," Johnny said. "Wayne and me had a little fracas with four of 'em a while ago at the Cowboy's Retreat I don't believe Mark Croyden is crooked, but how about givin' me a warrant for arrestin' Sugar Babe Jorrum on—"

"I've already heard about that affair," the Judge cut him off, his brow darkening. "You are doing your best to cause trouble between Jorrum Creek and Mesquite, and that will have to stop. I was going to read you a sharp lecture on your actions, my boy, but I'm sure you can see the folly of what you are doing."

Johnny just looked at the Judge in surprise.

"I'm doin' the job of sheriff the best I know how, Judge Garvey," he said then. "I may make some mistakes as I go along, which same I'll gladly fix up if folks give me the chance, but I don't aim to leave any doubt in anybody's mind about me bein' the sheriff. Right now I'm listenin' to reason. Mr. Croyden talked me out of throwin' Sugar Babe Jorrum in jail. So I'm here to tell yuh about the fracas and to ask yuh for a warrant for Sugar Babe for killin'. How about it?"

Judge Garvey changed from austerity to persuasiveness.

"Look, my boy, you just heard of this new trouble with Blaze Jorrum that Bill Haglin is having. You have riled the Jorrums plenty in the past two months. Understand, I don't say you are wrong, but I am counseling patience. We don't want a bloody war with the men of Jorrum Creek. I want you to let the entire matter drop for the present. I want you to sit tight until a more propitious moment.

Then, I promise you, I'll back you up to the limit in cleaning up Jorrum Creek. And I mean that!"

His voice rang with sincerity and determination and, while he hadn't said any more than, if as much as Croyden, his manner of saying it carried far more conviction. Morgan could see that Johnny was becoming as soft wax in the judge's hands. Which probably was for the best, but he couldn't refrain from an ironic dig that caused the young sheriff to glance at him queerly.

"But, Judge Garvey, how about the killin' of Sheriff Baylor?" Morgan asked. "Yuh mean yuh want to let that matter slide, too? Folks who shoot law officers shouldn't go unpunished."

Judge Garvey straightened up and his face went hard as granite.

"Young man," he promised in a stern voice, "Sugar Babe Jorrum will hang for that deed before this year is out."

"That's all I want to know," Johnny said, getting to his feet. "I'll be waitin' for yuh to give me the word to go get him."

Downstairs, Morgan parted from Johnny, and went over to Dr. Winelow's office to cut the trail of the four Jorrum Creek men. Learning that they had already left town, he went to the livery barn and got his roan horse he had ridden in from the hideout he and Blue Hawk had chosen.

He rode out of town along the Jorrum trail for a couple of miles before turning aside in the gathering dusk and descending into the creek bottoms. Shortly he came upon Blue Hawk, cooking a simple evening meal in a cunningly concealed camp near the roaring waters of Jorrum Creek.

"Senor!" cried the Indian, arising happily from his place by the fire. "You are in time for supper."

"All right, Hawk," agreed Morgan, checking his impatience. "We will eat. Then I have work for yuh. I want yuh to go up this stream and look into the connection between two men named Mark Croyden and Blaze Jorrum."

"Good," the Indian grunted, drawing his stag-handled hunting knife from a beautifully beaded sheath to cut meat and bread. "You tell me all about it as we eat."

CAPTER VII

Land Deal

A CONSIDERABLE distance north of Mesquite, straggling for several miles up into the hills along the creek bottoms, were the cabins of the Jorrums. About midway of this tribal community, at a dog-leg bend in the main stream where it had been convenient for the first Jorrum to build a grist mill, was the settlement of Jorrum Mill. Here old Blaze Jorrum operated the mill and the only general store, sat in judgment and guidance of his entire tribe, issued all mandates to his clan, and in the main controlled the lives of his kin, descendants, and followers in patriarchal style.

About noon the following day Blue Hawk, having arranged with Wayne Morgan for the latter to see after their camp and remuda until his return, made his way on foot into this mountain settlement. His rather long and straight black hair was bound down with a red bandeau, his stalwart form clad in dun-colored shirt and trousers set off by the bright beadwork of his hunting knife sheath. His handsome face inscrutable, the Indian surveyed the place. Save for the knife he was unarmed.

A cluster of perhaps two dozen structures in haphazard grouping and varying stages of unpainted disrepair. Practically no fencing save for an occasional stake-and-rider rail fence which enclosed a half-hearted garden patch. Ditry, tow-headed children, scrawny chickens, slab-sided razorback hogs, and emaciated, lugubrious hound dogs abounded. Indifferent cattlemen, the Jorrums ran their cows back in the brush. Only the horses Blue Hawk saw were of good stock and properly cared for.

Next to the grist mill, which was operating this morning, was the false-fronted general store, the largest building in the settlement and the only one with any attempt at name or sign. Across the upper front in peeling, fading black and white paint was the single word: "Jorrum."

A lanky stripling in homespun jeans and hickory shirt was leaning in the door-

way. This, Blue Hawk learned soon enough, was Frankie Howell, old Blaze's grandson, a greedy and lazy youth who was greedy enough to be dissatisfied with his lot and too lazy to do anything about it.

His father had been a flatlander from Kansas, an ex-schoolteacher who, before riding away from Jorrum Creek forever, had taught his son to read and write and do a little ciphering. Frankie, a couple of jumps ahead of the rest of his generation in education, and one lap behind them in the disgrace of a deserted mother, had naturally become a clerk in his grandfather's store.

Born tired, Frankie was not a drudge. He got out of most work. He straightened up now for an instant in mild excitement at the appearance of a full-blooded Indian on Jorrum Creek, then slumped back against the door frame as the red man approached, scattering chickens and barking dogs before him, finally stepping upon the porch in his moccasined feet.

"How!" grunted the Indian in guttural accents. "You ketchum food for red brother? Hungry. Eat. Workum for grub."

"How?" replied Frankie, aping him, all the time eyeing the red man appraisingly. "You first Injun brave come Jorrum Creek many moons. You wantum work? You ketchum! Come in."

Blue Hawk, his face perfectly blank at the other's smark aleck attitude, followed into the store where Frankie promptly handed him a broom and instructed him to sweep the littered, dirty floor. Purposely acting on the slow-witted side, presumably being a frontier Indian with no education, Blue Hawk set obediently to work. One chore finished only led to another, all of which he performed with patient dexterity. His youthful employer lolled on a small sack of new saddle blankets and thought up jobs for his stupid new helper.

Blue Hawk, silently observing everything about the store—including Frankie Howell—had been working more than an hour when a man came in the back door from the grist mill. He was tall and erect as a young pine, his shoulders nearly as wide as the doorway through which he entered.

He was as bushy-headed as one of the elder prophets and his hair and full beard were snow-white, save for the tobacco stains at the corners of his mouth. His jet black eyes stabbed like twin bolts of lightning, and there was an arrogant air of command about him that was unmistakable.

HE MUST have been 'way up in his seventies, and he carried himself with the active vigor of a boy in his teens —not Frankie. He wore a flour-dusted miller's apron, and there was powdery dust on his hands and face and even in his penthouse eyebrows. Hawk knew before a word was spoken that this old fire-eater was Blaze Jorrum, the high sachem of Jorrum Creek.

"Frankie!" the old man called out in a resonant, clear bass voice that carried like the tone of a bell. "That last batch of grain's through. You take them sacks . . . *Har-rumph!* What's this? A redskin?"

"I hired him, Gramp, to sort of sweep up," Frankie explained, getting up from the pile of blankets and yawning. "He wanted a job."

"He's doin' a devil of a lot better'n you ever did," Blaze Jorrum said, scanning the clean floor and neatly arranged counters with his quick, stabbing glance. "But I don't have no truck with Injuns since yore great gramma got her head split open by a tomahawk just as we was lickin' the daylights out of some wild Comanches."

"He's just workin' to get some grub, Gramp," Frankie smoothly interjected, to ward off the threadbare anecdote of the last Comanche raid. "I promised to give him his supper when he gets done cleanin' them back shelves."

"Yuh got him to do all this just for supper?"

"I reckon," said Frankie, grinning. "We ain't made no deal—exactly. He said he was willin' to work for vittles, so I let him."

The old man shook his head in faint exasperation at this grandson's slick ways.

"I don't trust Injuns. This one's liable to lift yore scalp with that rib-tickler he's wearin' if yuh try to pay him off for all this work with a few vittles."

"I reckon not, Gramp. I'm fixin' to trade him out of that belt and beaded

knife sheath. He'll swap for a pint of likker."

"Don't give him any likker till he's through here," Blaze Jorrum ordered. "What's his name?"

"Don't know. He can't talk much English. Just a dumb Injun."

"He ain't too dumb to work," opined the old man thoughtfully. "He's got this place cleaner'n I ever remember seein' it. We could use him for a few days to clean up the store and mill."

"Want me to hire him on, Gramp?"

"You get them flour sacks over to the mill and sack up that meal. I'll do my own hirin' . . . Hey, redskin! You likem work mebbeso one week for two dollars? Two dollars—and one big pint of firewater? Heap strong stuff for good strong man, yuh savvy?"

Blue Hawk straightened up and eyed the old man with a blankly grave face. Blaze Jorrum repeated his offer, resorting to sign language to make the bargain clearer. Hawk, who couldn't have been driven off with an ax from a chance like this, pretended to be groping to comprehend.

"You feedum Little Thunder?" he asked, patting his stomach.

"Twice a day and give yuh a good place to sleep over at the mill," Blaze Jorrum offered in hearty generosity. "Thunder's yore name, is it?"

"Little Thunder," Blue Hawk said, dully nodding.

"Well, how about it?" the old man urged. "Good job, good pay, good treatment, good firewater when yuh're through. Yuh ketchum?"

"Me ketchum," said Hawk.

"Just don't stray away from the store and the mill," the old man cautioned. "Yuh might get in trouble with some of the boys. Jorrum Creek men don't cotton much to Injuns. Now take the rest of them sacks over to Frankie at the mill. He can't carry nothin'!"

"Now, Gramp," called Frankie from the door where he was leaving with a scant handful of meal sacks. "If the Lord had wanted me to be all the time carryin' stuff He'd of made me a jackass."

"Well?" snapped Blaze Jorrum curtly. "And so?"

Frankie made off in rout from his grandsire's acid tongue. Blue Hawk, his face perfectly sober and blank, followed after.

Hawk became porter for a general store and a grist mill, working all day long at menial, drudging tasks and sleeping at night on a straw pallet in the loft of the mill where sacks of grain were opened and dumped into the big hopper that fed the two huge millstones below. Blaze Jorrum worked him hard but fed him well, having his food brought to him in a bucket from one of the houses.

BLUE HAWK learned at once that Blaze Jorrum left the running of the store mostly to his grandson and spent much of his own time at the mill where he held his family and tribal court. Spending as much time as possible around the old hellion, listening to all that was said and sizing up everybody who came to see the head of the clan, Hawk overheard many things pertaining to the trials, troubles, and tribulations of lesser Jorrums. But he learned absolutely nothing that Wayne Morgan wanted to know concerning the affairs of Blaze Jorrum and Mark Croyden.

It was a monotonous, thankless job, and Hawk wasted nearly three days at this pursuit before he gleaned the least bit of information that pertained to anything outside the territory of Jorrum Creek, except the growing dissatisfaction with the sheriff. Sugar Babe Jorrum must have reported on his narrow escape from arrest before Blue Hawk arrived, for he didn't come near the settlement until the afternoon of Hawk's third day.

Then luck broke for the Indian. Luck—both good and bad.

It was late afternoon and a number of Jorrum men were lazing around the settlement in the shade, including the notorious Sugar Babe and his entirely recovered bunch, when two horsemen rode into Jorrum Mill from upcreek.

They had come down from sheep country up Colorado way. They were travel-weary, dust-coated, and hard-looking cases, armed with six-shooters and rifles. They asked for Blaze Jorrum, and Frankie directed them over to the mill where the old man was passing out some local law on Tad Jorrum's hogs gettings into Pete Jorrum's corn crib, and watching his Indian helper clean out some bins which had been musty since the grinding

of the first batch of cornmeal.

The two men ground-hitched their excellent horses in the fashion of cattlemen, and exchanged greetings with the Jorrum loafers in the shade. They walked on under the wide lintel of the mill entrance and entered the cool interior of the stone structure quite as though they knew their way about here. Obviously they did.

"Howdy, Beck—howdy, Duncan," old Blaze Jorrum greeted at sight of his visitors. "That'll be all I want to hear about hogs in the corn. Tad, you give Pete two shoats now or a full-grown hog come hog-killin' time, whichever he wants. Now both of yuh clear out."

The two visitors stood aside as Tad and Pete left the mill. Then they walked over toward the old man, and Blue Hawk heard his first interesting item.

"Hi, Mr. Jorrum," said Beck. "We come to find out if the Haglin place is ready."

The old man clawed at his beard and eyed both men shrewdly. Blue Hawk slowed down his brushing work to listen.

"Yuh got the money for the option?" Jorrum inquired.

"Shore," Duncan answered, pulling a buckskin pouch from his pocket. "Thomas Bledsoe's a man of his word. He . . . Hold on there! What d'you mean option? We got a thousand dollars here to give yuh in exchange for the deed to the Haglin ranch."

"I meant option, boys," said Blaze Jorrum, stabbing them gently with his sharp black eyes. "A land deed comes to six thousand; an option to purchase or lease-rent to graze sheep one season comes to one thousand."

Beck protested. "But Blesdoe already sent yuh five thousand to buy Haglin's ranch with. All we got is yore thousand profit for makin' the deal for him."

"You tryin' to hold Tom Blesdoe up?" demanded Duncan, a snarl in his voice. "You know dang well what the deal was."

"Yes, I know," said the old man, looking as benevolent as a prophet. "But there's been a slight change in plans. If yuh want to carry off a deed to the Haglin place yuh'll have to dig up another thousand dollars. For that extra money—"

"That's crazy!" Beck interrupted.

"Bledsoe won't stand for it," Duncan said.

"Shut up and listen!" snapped Blaze Jorrum, his eyes beginning to kindle sparks. "For that extra money yuh get a deed to the place, with a clause in it guaranteein' full water rights to Twisted Creek. Without that agreement written right in the deed you boys ain't got any protection against me shuttin' off the creek fork like I threatened to do to Bill Haglin. So yuh know it's worth the extra money."

"Why, dang yore hide, old man!" Beck said hotly. "We ain't got the authority to make a deal like that with yuh, much less the money. If we was to do it anyhow our boss would believe me and Duncan was lyin' about it and just cuttin' ourselves in on the deal."

"We can't do it!" Duncan snarled. "Yuh can't set up a new deal right in the middle of one yuh've already agreed on. Yuh're goin' to go through with the original deal or—"

"Or what?" asked Blaze Jorrum as he broke off. "I wouldn't of thought of that water deal I put to Bill Haglin if he hadn't got smart and sent the sheriff after Sugar Babe over one stray cow.

CHAPTER VIII

Blue Hawk Blunders

UNDERSTANDINGLY, the two Bledsoe men looked at each other. Blue Hawk stopped working altogether and turned around to watch. If these two ugly customers decided to jump the old man the Jorrum boys outside could never make it in time.

But evidently the old hellion was quite sure of his ground. He showed not the slightest uneasiness, and made no offer to call any of his clan closer.

Swallowing his ire, Beck took the buckskin pouch from his partner and clinked it against one hand.

"Look, Blaze," he said. "You know we can't make any such deal with yuh in Bledsoe's name."

"Why not?" the old man demanded calmly. "Yuh made the original deal for him, didn't yuh?"

"Yes, but this is different. He'd never believe we wasn't puttin' somethin' to him our own selves. You know who Bledsoe

really is. You know he knows every move we're all makin'. We couldn't put it over. And you can't get away with what yuh're tryin'."

The old man's eyes flashed fire, but his voice remained clear and mild.

"I reckon you men ain't real well acquainted with the name of Jorrum. There ain't anybody tells us when and how to do what. We tell other folks. Nev' mind rattlin' that sack of gold coin at me. Yuh want that option to buy the Haglin place or a year's lease on it for a thousand dollars?"

"For gosh sake, Sam," Duncan said to Beck, "make some kind of deal with him. You know we got three thousand woolies just across the state line we got to do somethin' with."

"Look, Blaze Jorrum," said Beck desperately. "I'm only a messenger. Will yuh take this thousand dollars on deposit on this deal and give me a receipt for it and the right to drive them sheep on in, the details of the deal to be settled between you and Bledsoe personal?'

Blaze Jorrum considered this suggestion carefully while his visitors hung on his answer. Then he abruptly nodded.

"Yep," he agreed. "I'll do that. You tell Bledsoe for me there ain't no use him tryin' to figger a way to cheat me out of that extra thousand dollars. For his information I sent down to the county seat last week and had my deed on the Haglin place recorded in my name. He gets too smart, and he'll have to pay me full price for that ranch to run his sheep on."

Blue Hawk, who had taken in every word of this extraordinary conversation, drew a sharp breath.

"*Madre de Cristo!*" he exclaimed. "You are going to let these men bring sheep into a cattle country, senor?"

All three men jerked their heads about to look at him.

"An educated redskin!" ejaculated Duncan.

"Yes," said Blaze Jorrum, looking at Blue Hawk with eyes that jabbed twin holes through the subject. "Yes, so he is. Sugar Babe! You boys come arunnin'!"

And Blue Hawk realized he had made a terrible blunder. . . .

While waiting word from Blue Hawk in town, Wayne Morgan went systematically about performing the duties of a good deputy sheriff. Aside from taking off time morning and night to ride to the hideout near the Jorrum trail and care for the horses, he devoted all of his attention to matters in and around the county seat.

One of the first things he did was to meet Robin O'Neal. Johnny saw to that the morning following their visit to Judge Garvey's office. It was Saturday—the day Blue Hawk went to Jorrum Mill—and Morgan had just got back to Mesquite from the hideout when he met the sheriff on the street.

"Hey, Wayne!" Johnny called to him as he was turning the corner to ride around to the jail.

Morgan promptly reined around and rode to the courthouse front where the young sheriff was standing in the street talking to a girl sitting in a handsome gig. He tethered his horse to the long hitch-rail which ran the length of the building front and strode over to the stylish buggy to which were hitched a pair of spanking good bay horses.

"Where yuh been, mister?" demanded Johnny. "I been lookin' for yuh ever since last night."

"A feller has to eat and sleep," Morgan drawled in mock complaint. "I didn't know yuh was hirin' my whole time, Sheriff."

"I want yuh to know Miss Robin O'Neal," Johnny said proudly. "Robin, this is my new deputy I was tellin' yuh about."

MORGAN removed his Stetson and took a long look up at the dancing blue eyes of Judge Garvey's ward, and he understood without further words why Johnny Winfield acted so crazy, and why Flora Drake didn't have a chance with the sheriff. If he had been a few years younger and not so tangled up in the dangerous double life he was leading he might have given Johnny some competition himself.

"Howdy, ma'am," he said, smiling.

"How do you do, Mr. Morgan," the girl responded, offering her hand in a frank, boyish clasp. "Johnny has told me a lot about you. Let me thank you for helping him yesterday afternoon."

"No thanks are due me, Miss Robin," Morgan assured her. "Johnny tied into

some trouble and I just helped him a little by backin' his play. I got a job out of it. I owe the thanks."

"That's not how Johnny told it," she said, and Morgan was glad to observe that the sheriff was thoroughly honest with this girl. He didn't attempt to take credit for what was not due him. "I'm so glad he made you his deputy," Robin went on, holding tight to his hand and pouring her heart into her words. "He—he needs an older man like you beside him. I'm so glad he has you. Don't let him act so reckless in the future. I know he's fine and brave and true. And Uncle Ben will come around to that view mighty soon."

"With a prize like you to work for, I'm shore Johnny'll make good. I'll help him all I can."

Morgan made a mental note to take the sheriff to task about Flora Drake and break things off cleanly but decently with the dance hall hostess.

"Well, yuh needn't stand there holdin' my girl's hand like yuh was hitched to her," the sheriff complained. "I just wanted yuh to meet her, not beat my time."

Morgan grinned and released the girl's slim hand. Robin colored and laughed as she withdrew her fingers.

"That's how I got in trouble with the Judge myself," Johnny went on humorously. "Holdin' Robin's hand in front of the bank in this very buggy. You goin' around to the jailhouse, Wayne? I want to talk to yuh pretty soon."

"All right, I'll see yuh later. Since I'm here at the front door I'll go on into the courthouse on a little business. Glad to have met yuh, Miss O'Neal. I think Johnny's a mighty lucky man."

"Thank you, Mr. Morgan," she answered, looking deep into his eyes which were as blue as her own. "I know Johnny's lucky—and yesterday was one of his luckiest days."

Morgan left the young couple chatting there and went on into the downstairs of the county building. He sought the county clerk's office where he introduced himself—an unnecessary gesture, as he was already known all over town—and asked some questions about land transfers. He was following up the information he had picked up the afternoon before in Judge Garvey's office.

There was no use discussing the matter with Johnny Winfield. The sheriff was satisfied that Mark Croyden was an honest and upright citizen. Another nice trait in the young man—loyalty. But there was no need being blind to obvious facts. So Morgan did the checking for the sheriff like a good deputy should.

Knowing that options to buy did not, in themselves, mean anything, Morgan wasn't sure what he might learn about the owner of the Cowboy's Retreat. He was somewhat surprised to find in checking back for the past year that Mark Croyden had bought outright nine pieces of property for a total of twenty-eight thousand dollars.

Aside from the interesting question of where Croyden raised that much cold cash to sink into ranch property, Morgan became curious as to what and where this property was. The clerk was obliging. He produced a map of the county and checked the holdings off on it.

To the mild surprise of both they found the nine pieces of land to form a solid block of acreage north of town. The land stretched from the Jorrum trail on the east to Pawpaw on the west, and bordered the Geary, Brules, and Haglin places on the south.

CARL GREEN, the county clerk, knew nothing about the options on the Geary and Brules ranches, but Morgan could see at a glance that, if and when Croyden took up these holdings, he would have a consolidated stretch of rangeland about ten miles square, or more than sixty thousand acres. Not a big ranch empire as some ranches went, but nothing to be sneezed at in any cowman's country. If Croyden got the Haglin place, he would have a solid block of land between Garvey's Raftered G on the west and the Jorrum Creek country on the east, and reaching north to the county line.

"What sort of land is all this?" Morgan asked the clerk. "You know?"

"Darn good pasturage," Green assured him. "Mostly watered by Twisted Creek, but other sources could be developed—wells and dams and such—if a man wanted to spend the money. This plumb knocks me off the Christmas tree. I never knew Mark Croyden was interested in cattle land. I don't reckon he's figgerin' on any other purpose. I never heard of it

bein' good for anyone else. Yuh don't suppose he's goin' to start farmin', do yuh, Morgan?"

"I'm not familiar with the land hereabouts, but I wouldn't think so. Well, thanks for yore help. Please keep it quiet. Croyden might not want his affairs noised about."

"Shore, shore," the clerk agreed. "It's no skin off my nose. But it's funny about that Jorrum-Haglin deal recorded yesterday, ain't it? Looks like old Blaze Jorrum is doin' some expandin'."

"Yes, don't it?" Morgan agreed carelessly, and walked out.

But he was anything but careless about this bit of information. He had spotted that transfer record at the outset. So that was why Sugar Babe Jorrum had come to town yesterday—to record the Haglin deed in his uncle's name.

How did this tie in with Croyden's manipulations in real estate? It definitely looked now that Croyden and Blaze Jorrum were swinging some big land scheme together. But it also looked as though Blaze Jorrum might be slipping a joker into the deck for Mark Croyden to stumble against. Or maybe it had been planned this way from the beginning between the two men.

Anyhow, Mark Croyden was definitely up to his ears in something. Time would tell what it was—unless the Masked Rider could snap it up by the judicious application of a goad.

CHAPTER IX

The Knife Sheath

FROM the courthouse Morgan went over to the Cowboy's Retreat where he had a chat with Flora Drake. He wanted to talk about Croyden, but had little luck today. She was delighted he had become deputy sheriff and avidly discussed Johnny and Johnny's future, but she shied away from every casual reference to her boss.

Without tipping his own hand, and not thinking the moment propitious to discuss her affair with the sheriff, Morgan left shortly. He went to meet Johnny at the jail.

He encountered Johnny coming from the courthouse with a big law book under his arm.

"Judge Garvey loaned me this," Johnny explained. "It tells about the office of sheriff. I figgered I might as well study up on it in my spare time."

"Good idea. How was the Judge this morning?"

"Pretty good. I think he likes me better. He asked me all about you. I told him what I could. That's what I want to see yuh about. Where'd yuh sleep last night?"

"Oh, I camped out," Morgan said truthfully.

"There's a spare room at Ma Chryson's boardin' house yuh can get. She's the lady I lived with ever since I can remember. She brought me up until I got big enough to rustle for myself. Yuh'll like it there."

"Thanks. I may take yuh up on that later. Not for a day or so." Morgan knew it was risky for him to camp out with the Masked Rider's horses, but he had to wait for the return of Blue Hawk before making other arrangements. "There's something I want to talk to yuh about, feller. Especially since I met Robin O'Neal this mornin'. That's Flora Drake."

"Yeah?" Johnny said carelessly. "What about her?"

"That's what I'm askin' you," said Morgan. "She's crazy about you. You're gone on Robin. Why don't yuh let Flora know she hasn't got a chance?"

Johnny looked at him blankly for a moment. Then he began to laugh. "Yuh're loco, Wayne," he chuckled. "Flora Drake's just a big sister to me, that's all."

That wasn't all, Morgan knew, but he desisted for the time being.

Johnny, temporarily checked in the Sugar Babe Jorrum matter by the promise of Judge Garvey, remained in a quiescent state for the next day or so, his nose earnestly buried in the law book the Judge had loaned him. Morgan found it possible to relax his vigilance somewhat.

Among other things he made it his business to drop in at the Cowboy's Retreat a least twice a day, afternoon and evening, to visit with Flora Drake. It was the fourth day of Blue Hawk's absence before he sufficiently won her confidence for the dance hall hostess to tell him any-

thing about Mark Croyden.

"Look, Morgan," she said, gazing at him levelly as she toyed with her wine glass. "Why are you always bringing the subject around to Mark Croyden? What's he to you? Why do you want to know about him?"

"What makes yuh think I'm specially interested in Croyden?"

"Oh, you're smooth enough in your approach, but I'm no young chicken at this game myself. In fact, I might tell you that Mark's beginning to ask *me* questions about *you*. I do believe you're making him jealous."

"Is that bad?"

"No," she said, tossing her head. "It's good."

"Does he ever get jealous of Johnny?"

"Of course not," Flora answered, looking at him peculiarly. "Why should he? Johnny's altogether different from you."

Morgan shrugged. "Croyden's a deep sort, but there is somethin' likable about him."

"There's a lot likable about him," she said with emphasis. "Mark's one of the few gentlemen I've met in his business. He may seem just a tough saloonkeeper and dance hall operator to you, but he's far more than that. I'll tell you this much about him. His life's ambition is to be a respected cattleman. He wants to raise prize cattle and blooded horses. And if you try to pin anything else on him you'll be a dirty dog besides wasting your time."

SO SOMEBODY else had a sense of loyalty toward Mark Croyden. Morgan felt a certain admiration for this woman. He also wondered about the personality of the man who inspired this emotion. Expert at sizing up men, Morgan was satisfied Mark Croyden was a dangerous man, acquisitive and grasping, crooked where it suited his purpose to be crooked.

But there was no use trying to tell Flora Drake this. Neither was there point. Besides which, Morgan as yet could prove nothing illegal against the man. So far, in all Morgan had checked, the man had not overstepped the letter of the law.

"I only hope," he murmured, "that Mark Croyden merits yore good opinion."

"Oh, Mark has his faults," Flora admitted frankly. "Who hasn't? But they're not the kind he'll hang for. I see he's coming down from his office now and he's looking at us. I think he's coming over to this table."

"Is he?" Morgan inquired lazily without looking around. "Anything further to say about him before he gets here?"

"No," she answered, making a little moue of annoyance at him for not falling for the ruse. Then, as she glanced toward the front of the house, her eyes widened and lighted up. "Oh, there's Johnny! He's looking for you I think—and he *is* coming to our table."

Morgan swung swiftly around at this. He saw that Croyden had stopped on the stair landing which was to him like the bridge of a ship to a sea captain. Johnny Winfield, striding hurriedly across the floor toward his deputy, raised a hand in salute to the saloon owner but did not swerve from his course.

"Wayne," he said, "there's a kid over at the jailhouse askin' to see you. He's actin' kind of suspicious. Seems pretty anxious. . . . Hello, Flora."

"Hello, Johnny," the woman said, looking up at the young man with her heart in her eyes.

"Who is the kid?" Morgan asked. "Yuh know?"

"He's one of the Jorrum bunch. Name's Frank Howell. He came to town for some grocery staples for the general store at Jorrum Mill. I don't know what he wants with yuh, but I said I'd find yuh."

Morgan instantly excused himself to Flora Drake and headed for the jail. Johnny went right along beside him.

At the jail building a lanky boy in his teens was lolling in a chair but beginning to fidget under the eye of Walter Gimp. Morgan surveyed the lad doubtfully.

"This the lad who wants to see me?" he asked.

"Are you Deputy Sheriff Morgan?" Frankie demanded cautiously.

"That's right."

"Well—er—here!" said the lad, suddenly fishing something from his pocket and thrusting it out toward Morgan. "Yuh still want to buy this?"

Morgan slowly extended his hand and took the object. It was Blue Hawk's beaded knife sheath.

The jailer and sheriff looked on curious-

ly as Morgan turned the sheath over in his hands. But Morgan's mind was racing furiously.

This was a delicate situation. Yet it could not have been a trap of any kind. The sending of this knife sheath to him meant that Blue Hawk was in trouble, undoubtedly a prisoner. But the fact that the messenger had sought him out of all people meant that Hawk had definitely, in some sly manner, directed the search.

Hawk had sent this message. How much could Morgan learn of the circumstances without letting any one of these three people learn too much about his relationship with the Indian? He always had to be careful about this.

To protect them both, he kept Blue Hawk's association with the Masked Rider as secret as his own. The two friends could work and travel together as drifting cowhands without danger of discovery. In this case, Hawk was communicating with him as Wayne Morgan, but the need was obviously for the Masked Rider.

"Where did yuh get this sheath, son?" Morgan asked in a gentle voice.

"From an Injun I met up in the hills. I swapped him out of it. He told me yuh offered him five dollars for it, that it was a standin' offer. I'll sell it to yuh for that price."

"All right, yuh've sold it," Morgan agreed, digging out a handful of silver. "I saw the Indian last week. When did you meet up with him?"

"Yesterday. I got the sheath from him last night. They—he kept the knife."

AFTER Frankie Howell had departed Johnny Winfield examined the beaded sheath.

"Nice piece of Indian work," he said, "but yuh're a chump, Wayne, to pay such a price for it. I bet that Jorrum kid stole it from yore Indian friend."

"Mebbe so," said Morgan, glancing out the window toward the west at the lowering sun. "In which case I'll give it back to Blue Hawk when I meet him again. I'll see you boys in the mornin'."

Pocketing the knife sheath, Morgan walked out and forked his roan. He rode carelessly out of sight in the direction of the livery barn. But he never arrived there.

A short while later he was riding northward out of town. Watching his back trail, he cut away from the road and made his way down into the shallow coulee that led to the hideout of the Masked Rider. Within the hour, mounted on the magnificent black stallion who could travel for miles at high speed over any sort of passable terrain while carrying double, the black-garbed figure of the Masked Rider was heading into the mountain fastness that was Jorrum country.

CHAPTER X

Jorrum Creek Jamboree

IT WAS night, and after more than twenty-four hours of alternate questioning and deliberation old Blaze Jorrum was sitting in judgment on Blue Hawk. The Indian, bound to one of the tree bole pillars supporting the second-floor joists of the mill, stared stoically at his judge. He didn't know which was considered the greater crime—his deception or what he had overheard.

Beck and Duncan had been all for cutting his throat at once, but Blaze Jorrum had refused, wanting to learn from the Indian his purpose in coming here. But it had been like trying to get information out of the post to which Hawk was tied. The two Bledsoe men, disgruntled and sore, had departed at dawn to get on with their sheep business.

Blue Hawk, tied erect to this pillar ever since his capture by the Sugar Babe quartet, was deeply chagrined at his own stupidity. He had tried to figure some way out of his dilemma or, failing that, some way of letting Wayne Morgan know what had happened to him.

He got his break when Frankie Howell brought breakfast to him and exhibited Hawk's beaded knife sheath which he had managed to procure when Bearcat Mahoney disarmed the prisoner. Upon learning that Frankie was driving to Mesquite for sugar, salt, and coffee, Blue Hawk cooked up his story about the deputy sheriff wanting to buy the knife sheath at a fancy price, trusting the lad's cupidity to do the rest.

Now it was night again, and Blaze Jor-

rum, having learned nothing from the obstinate Indian, was turning Hawk over to the sadistic mercies of Sugar Babe and his bunch for disposal. Just what real difference it made for this lone redskin to be aware of the Bledsoe plan Blaze Jorrum neither knew nor cared. He simply didn't like Indians in the first place, this one had been caught spying, and to let Sugar Babe and the boys have sport with him was an easy way to shut his mouth. Besides which, killing off this redskin would save two dollars and a pint of good liquor.

Sugar Babe, the Mitchell brothers, and Bearcat Mahoney were waiting like a pack of slavering dogs for the prisoner to be thrown to them. Bearcat was honing Blue Hawk's own hunting knife to a razor edge, preparatory to slicing off the Indian's ears. Big Mitch and Little Mitch were discussing whether it would be more sport to burn him at the stake or use him for a knife target. Sugar Babe suggested splitting his head open with a hatchet like the Comanches had done to Aunty Betsy twenty years previous.

"I don't care what you boys do," stated Blaze Jorrum, getting to his feet, "just so's yuh don't make too much noise and disturb the womenfolks of the settlement. Come along to the house with me, Sugar Babe, and fetch a jug of likker."

The old man started out, stopping in front of the roped Blue Hawk long enough to look at the prisoner with visible regret.

"For a redskin, yuh're the best swamper I ever seen, Thunder," he said, heaving a sigh. "This place is shore goin' to get dirty again."

He walked out, followed by his nephew, and Bearcat Mahoney left off honing his knife and started his asthmatic laughter.

"I'll just slice off the tip of his nose to see if his knife is sharp enough," he said, advancing and sticking his ugly face close to the Indian's.

Slowly he brought his knife toward the end of Hawk's nose. Blue Hawk did not flinch, instead meeting the man's gaze with level eyes.

"Why don't yuh beg, Injun?" Mahoney demanded. "Why don't yuh ask for mercy?"

"A man dies only once," Blue Hawk said. "A coward dies many times."

Bearcat Mahoney quit laughing long enough to blink at this. The two Mitchell brothers ceased their drunken argument to watch. For a moment there was no sound in the old stone building save the mournful coughing of wind through the trees outside and the dismal creaking of the water wheel idling on its shaft.

"Well?" drawled Little Mitch finally. "Are yuh goin' to slice his nose or not, Bearcat?"

THERE was a grating sound at the door, like a boot grinding sand against the stone threshold. All eyes jerked in that direction—and stared in petrified amazement. A tall, commanding figure in somber black, masked and cloaked, stood there. In each black gauntleted hand was a .45 six-shooter.

"I wouldn't, Bearcat," the apparition said in a deep, gruff voice. "There's a better use for that knife. Step around to the back of that post and cut his bonds. All three of yuh move backward, and I'll move with yuh. Pronto does it!"

"Senor!" exclaimed Blue Hawk. "Be careful of your back. Two others just went to a house after whisky."

"The heck I will!" roared Bearcat Mahoney. "Jump him, Mitch! I don't care if that black devil's the Masked Rider!"

"You fool," said Big Mitch, "it *is* the Masked Rider!"

Little Mitch let out a yell like a steam whistle and dived toward the nearest window. Big Mitch, thinking fast, sprang in the opposite direction to divide the Masked Rider's attention now that his brother had made a break. Bearcat Mahoney raised his knife to plunge it into Blue Hawk's shoulder at the base of the neck.

With phenomenal speed the Masked Rider leaped forward. One gun-barrel rose in a counter blow which struck the knife wielder's wrist, nearly breaking it, and knocking the weapon from Mahoney's grasp. Instantly the fellow whirled upon the masked man, drawing his own six-shooter in an adroit cross-hand draw.

There was nothing else for it. With a muttered curse of regret more at having to make gun noise than at having to kill such a venomous snake as this, the Masked Rider shot his antagonist through the head.

The gunshot rang out, apparently unmuffled in the close confines of the stone building. The Masked Rider holstered one gun and snatched up the knife even as Mahoney's body hit the tamped earth floor. With three swift slashes the rescuer freed the Indian and thrust one of his six-shooters into Hawk's eager hand.

"Out through the window nearest the water," the Masked Rider directed. "Midnight's behind the store."

From outside the end window, rising up just high enough to thrust his arm and gun back into the mill, Little Mitch blindly opened fire. From behind the huge millstones Big Mitch was shooting toward the spot where he had last seen the Masked Rider.

Gun thunder awoke the echoes. Hound dogs began to bark and howl. From scattered houses men began calling and running toward the mill. Blaze Jorrum and Sugar Babe started back on the double, the old man leaping like a young buck, Sugar Babe cursing.

Blue Hawk vaulted through the designated window and squatted there to return Big Mitch's fire while the Masked Rider sprang through. Then they both ran to the corner and along the side of the building toward the store. It seemed pitch-dark out here away from the flickering lantern light inside the mill, but both men, used to dark and woods and night fighting, moved unerringly toward their goal.

The Masked Rider whistled keenly, and there was an answering neigh from Midnight. The magnificent stallion sprang forward out of the blackness and stood trembling as his rider leaped to saddle, kicked the stirrup free, and held down his hand for the Indian. The great horse was in motion even as the two men locked hands.

Blue Hawk's foot never touched the stirrup. With a powerful heave, the Masked Rider swung him on behind where the Indian clamped himself to the cantle of the saddle like a chunk of wet glue.

Wicked tongues of gunflame licked out here and there through the darkness as Midnight thundered along the trail out of the settlement, running as easily as though he carried not even one rider instead of nearly four hundred pounds of saddle, guns, and men. The sounds of battle faded in the night behind them, and the Masked Rider let Midnight run free, leaving Blaze Jorrum to explain the disturbance to his womenfolks as best he could.

"I can get down and walk now, Senor," the Indian suggested after a short space. "You didn't bring the gray?"

"No other horses but this one champion," said the Masked Rider in his normal voice, patting the neck of the great steed. I had to slip in as quiet as possible. But Midnight can carry double back to the hideout. We'll slow down to a walk now. Tell me how yuh got into that mess, Hawk, and what yuh learned if anything."

Blue Hawk explained in detail, his companion listening without comment until he had finished.

"So Croyden, or someone, is masquerading under the name of Bledsoe, eh?" said the Masked Rider. "And it's a sheep

[*Turn page*]

LAWMAN LEW SPAIN HEADS FOR A ROARING SIX-GUN FANDANGO
WHEN HE BUCKS THE TOUGHEST OF BORDER OUTLAWS

IN

FILL YOUR HAND, MARSHAL

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•

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE!

deal, is it? Hawk, I want yuh to come to town in the mornin' and hunt me up as an old acquaintance. "I want yuh to tell me all this in front of Johnny Winfield. . . ."

THE following morning Blue Hawk, clad in clean white duck and none the worse for his experience among the Jorrums, faced Wayne Morgan and the sheriff in the lawman's office and related the story of the Jorrum-Haglin-Bledsoe deal. Morgan, pretending for Johnny's benefit that this was all news to him, gave Blue Hawk his knife sheath.

"This is little enough to give yuh back in return for this information, Blue Hawk," he said gravely. "The sheriff and I certainly thank yuh for what yuh've told us."

"Yuh believe this Indian's story, do yuh, Wayne?" Johnny asked. "Yuh know him to be honest Injun?"

"I've known Blue Hawk for years," Morgan said, "and I'll take his word for anything. You know yoreself he's been up in Jorrum country because that Jorrum kid stole his beaded knife sheath."

"That's right," Johnny admitted. "Well, what do yuh make of his story—sayin' it's gospel?"

"I reckon it's time to tell yuh some other news I've been holding back, Johnny," Morgan said. "Hang on to yore seat now while I break this to yuh easy-like. This is more gospel."

He proceeded to inform the sheriff of Mark Croyden's operations in real estate. Johnny's eyes got bigger and bigger as he talked and by the time he had finished the sheriff was walking restlessly back and forth across the room.

"So Mark Croyden has bought a lot of ranchin' land," Johnny said. "I don't know why, and I admit it looks funny. But he did it open and in his own name, didn't he? That shows he ain't pullin' any crooked deals. He was in the open on the Geary and Brules deals, wasn't he? Then why would he run a sandy over anybody in the Haglin deal?"

"The Haglin deal is the key piece of the whole business, Johnny," Morgan pointed out.

"Mebbe so, but Mark Croyden's name ain't mixed up in it. Huh-uh, yuh can't make me believe he's a crook. But this other business—this sheep deal, if true—is a whole lot more important to this entire section. I tell yuh that Jorrum outfit has got to be cleaned plumb out of this country."

Morgan nodded soberly. "I'm glad you see the seriousness of that, Johnny. I don't say for positive that it's Mark Croyden who's bringin' in the sheep. But if it is, a big wedge of land such as he has, if thrown into sheep range, would break the back of cow resistance to his plans before it could get organized. No matter who is behind this move, it will mean a bloodier stock war than this trouble with the Jorrums over a lone lawman killin'. I'd say it was time we had a showdown talk with Croyden."

"It's high time somethin' was done," Johnny muttered through his teeth. "And I didn't promise Judge Garvey I'd hold back on anything but the Sugar Babe Jorrum business."

"Then yuh'll go talk to Croyden with me?" Morgan asked.

"No, I won't," Johnny said violently. "Leastaways, not right now. I got another idea that makes more sense. I'll tell yuh about it later."

CHAPTER XI

Johnny Oversteps Himself

WAYNE MORGAN went out of the office with Blue Hawk. He was uneasy as he drew his faithful companion to one side.

"Johnny's getting spooky from plain inaction, Hawk," Morgan said. "And he's on the fence about Mark Croyden, while I'm not shore enough myself to give him a shove. I want you to freeze to the sheriff like his shadow while I do some work on Croyden's trail. Can do?

"Can do, Senor," the Indian answered.

Morgan shook hands warmly with his aide and went over to nose around the law office of Peebles and Pooney to see what if anything these gentry had unearthed for Judge Garvey. He found out they hadn't learned anything like as much as Blue Hawk had learned, but they hadn't risked anything like as much skin in their investigations either.

It was mid-afternoon before Morgan

decided to talk to Johnny again about the matter. When he looked for him he couldn't find Johnny. The sheriff had disappeared. And so had Blue Hawk.

At the jailhouse the fat Mr. Gimp looked at Morgan curiously.

"What kind of hot needle did yuh jab the sheriff with, Morgan?" he asked.

"Why?"

"He came high-tailin' it out of his office right after you left this mornin', stuck a saddle gun on his hoss, and said to tell yuh he had to go out of town for a day or so."

Wayne Morgan groaned inwardly. He could only hope that the young sheriff had not been so much on the prod that he would do anything foolish or reckless.

Johnny Winfield had been on the prod when he had ridden out of town. He was still on the prod now as he rode north toward the county line. He was a little mad at his deputy for trying to hang all this trouble and mischief onto a square shooter like Mark Croyden. Wayne Morgan had more sense than that.

But it was true that Croyden had been buying up ranch property at sharp prices. To people who didn't know the man as Johnny knew him this must look funny.

Bearing westward, the angry sheriff avoided Jorrum country, riding up through the Brules spread. When he hit Twisted Creek, reflecting that he didn't want Ted Brules crying on his shoulder about his land deal, on impulse he turned to the right and followed the water course over to the Haglin place. He stopped by the ranchhouse when he got there.

The place was deserted and already looked desolate. The windows gaped like eyeless sockets, the front door stood wide open, no smoke curled up from the chimney, no dog's bark greeted him. Haglin, of course, had moved his stock and personal belongings over to the Brules spread.

Johnny dismounted at the well, noticing that the bucket and the adjacent watering trough were already beginning to open at the seams from the hot sun. He drew several buckets of water for his horse, and another for himself.

"Sheep!" he muttered, looking around as he remounted. "Don't Morgan know that a big flock of sheep will pollute Twisted Creek water so that cattle on Brules' and Gearys' places won't drink it? Just as bad as Blaze Jorrum shuttin' off the creek flow in the first place! How can Wayne be so dumb as to think Croyden'd do that to himself?"

He rode on northward up a wide valley toward the distant blue hills. He passed beyond the county line, knowing it ran east and west across the foothills which formed a natural boundary for these Hackamore County ranges. Going through one of the wide, easy-graded passes to the north side of the low range of hills, he became particularly alert as he turned to ride patrol along the mouths of the half-dozen good passes leading southward.

"If Blue Hawk's story is true," he ruminated, "Beck and Duncan would of got back to where they was holdin' their flock on the state line some time yesterday. So they ought to be comin' through here some time today, the way I figger."

He figured correctly. Early afternoon revealed to him a light dust haze approaching the Hackamore Hills from the northwest. As details became clearer, the grim-faced young sheriff made out a low, wide-spread, creeping blanket of dirty gray which—to Johnny—crawled across the country like a leprous blight.

EVERYBODY knew that sheep cropped grass and pasturage much closer to the ground than cattle, and that their sharp little hoofs cut and trampled into dust the roots that were left, thereby ruining good grazing land for two or three years. No wonder cattlemen always fought bitterly against the encroachment of woolies.

But even good cow ranchers didn't always know that a lot of sheep could pollute a stream of water for miles as far as cattle were concerned. Maybe Wayne Morgan, being a cowboy, hadn't had much experience with sheep.

Sitting on a mesalike shoulder of the hill overlooking the pass that led into the Haglin valley, Johnny watched the approach of the big flock with sober eyes. He noted the flock was divided into three sections, a couple of Mexican or Indian shepherds afoot with dogs working each section. There was but one grub wagon with the outfit, signifying that the entire

flock was one unit bound for the same spot.

He counted four mounted men, all of whom converged in the van and rode forward together as their trail herd neared the pass. All four were white men, heavily armed, and with the stamp more of cowboys than sheepmen upon them. They also had the air of men who, while not exactly looking for trouble, were prepared to meet it.

Johnny got up and clambered down to the roadbed of the pass. Taking his Winchester from the saddle holster, he levered a shell into the chamber before swinging aboard his horse. Then, with the rifle cradled between knees and saddlehorn, he rode slowly out through the widening mouth of the pass to meet them.

That the herders had already spotted him was apparent in the fact that they had halted their horses just within the wide lips of the pass, grimly waiting for developments. The Mexican shepherds and dogs had ceased working the sheep and the three flocks were coming to a halt and spreading out.

The swarthy-skinned sheep tenders could smell trouble like they could smell rain. Let the gringo bosses straighten matters out.

Johnny stopped his horse some fifty feet short of the four horsemen. He surveyed them keenly, failing to recognize any of them.

"Howdy, men," he said. "I hope yuh didn't come very far with that flock of woolies."

"Far enough," said one, obviously the spokesman. It was Sam Beck, but Johnny didn't know it. "Is this the pass leadin' to the Haglin range?"

"Yeah, but I wouldn't take them woolies through it."

"Who says not?"

"I do. I'm the Sheriff of Hackamore County."

"Yuh're crowdin' yore authority."

"Not much. Yuh hit the county line before yuh get all the way through this pass."

"I don't mean that," said Beck. "I mean what right yuh got tryin' to stop us? We got legal rights to the Haglin range from Blaze Jorrum. This is the Bledsoe flock. Duncan, show the sheriff our lease."

"Yuh needn't mind," said Johnny. "I believe yuh, but I'm not lettin' yuh through. Hackamore's cow country."

"Where's yore restrainin' order?" the man named Duncan called out. "Show us that."

"Here it is," Johnny said, tapping the stock of his rifle.

The four sheepmen held a conference without troubling to make it private.

"He ain't got any legal grounds to stop us," declared Duncan savagely. "Let's run them woolies over him."

"But would he come out in the open like this to halt us if he didn't have backin'?" questioned one of the second pair. "Both sides of that pass may be lined with deputies and cattlemen."

"Naw," said Beck. "Nobody knows we're comin' in. I don't know how this jasper found it out."

"Unless," pointed out Duncan, "that old fool Jorrum let that Injun get away."

"He's by himself," said the fourth man. "You boys know what the boss said about this sheriff hairpin. He ain't got any deputies. Shucks, I'll scare him off for yuh by myself."

He put spurs to his horse and started forward.

"Clear the track, Mr. Sheriff!" he shouted. "We know our rights, and we're comin' through."

JOHNNY swept up his Winchester and cradled it under his right arm, his left hand on the barrel and pointing the weapon in the general direction of the four horsemen. His right forefinger rested against the trigger.

"Stop where yuh are, mister!" he warned. "No sheep are comin' into Hackamore County unless Judge Garvey says so."

"Haw!" exploded the other hilariously. "Unless Judge Garvey says so! You heard him, men. Look out, Sheriff. Here we come."

"Better come back, Pelton," Beck called after him. "Wait!"

But Pelton didn't stop. Gigging his horse to a faster pace to close the gap between him and the waiting sheriff, he dropped his right hand and drew his six-shooter.

He fired one shot in the air over Johnny's head as a warning.

Johnny's horse jumped in alarm just as

Johnny, his eyes beginning to glow with that crazy zeal when the driving urge was on him, did the same. *Cr-r-w-a-c-k!* The Winchester gave voice as the sheriff pressed his trigger without aiming the long gun.

Pelton uttered a startled, strangled cry, flung up his arm and toppled from the saddle. Without meaning to do so, Johnny had shot the man squarely through the chest.

Stunned for just a moment, the other three stared. Then, with one accord, they shouted, spurred their horses apart, pulled guns, and started to charge at the sheriff who was just as amazed at his deed as they were. Frantically he levered another cartridge into the chamber, but he would have been an eternity too slow. In such close work his rifle would have been no match whatsoever for three six-shooters.

It wasn't needed. There was another rifle shot from the brow of the eastern shoulder of the pass, the hot bullet cutting the air just in front of the noses of the three horses and *spanging* into the ground beyond them.

AS THE echo of this shot died away an unseen man's voice was shouting:

"Freeze, senores, and holster your guns! The next shot will string you like fish!"

Blue Hawk, shadowing Johnny Winfield like his shadow in truth, proved enough to tip the balance. All the fight was temporarily taken out of the sheepmen.

"I told you he had plenty of backin'," said the third man.

"Shut up, Wister, and see how bad Pelton's hurt," Duncan ordered.

"I can see from here," Beck said, his tone grim. "He's dead. What'll we do?"

"Shag out of here," said Wister.

"We'll make camp where we are," Duncan said. "I know how to handle this locoed sheriff. We'll go to Mesquite, Sam, and have his gun authority jerked out from under him."

"The boss," said Beck, his voice uneasy, "is goin' to be fit to be tied about this."

"All right, Sheriff, you win!" Duncan called. "We won't try to come through. Yuh goin' to let us pick up our man and take him back to camp?"

CHAPTER XII

The End of the World

JOHNNY was staring down at the dead man, sick misery in his eyes. It was the first man he had ever shot. He hadn't meant to kill him—he hadn't even meant to hit him. It was just one of those freak accidents. All the fight and starch was taken out of Johnny, too. Had they but known it the sheepmen could have driven on through the pass without further trouble.

"Well?" demanded Duncan curtly. "How about it? Can we pick up Pelton, or do we got to leave him there?"

"Shore, shore," said Johnny, shuddering. "Come and get him."

He sat there on his horse and watched silently as Wister and Beck tied Pelton's body across his horse. He continued to sit there, his finger on the trigger of his cocked rifle, and watched them withdraw into the distance. A voice finally aroused him, and he remembered the unexpected reinforcements which had saved him.

"Well, Senor Sheriff, you intend to sit there until the sun goes down?"

Johnny looked up at the hill but saw no one. He set his rifle on safety and walked his horse toward the eastern shoulder.

"Who is it?" he called up. "Yore voice is familiar."

"It is Blue Hawk, Senor Johnny. I followed you from town. It seems well that I did."

"Come on down, Blue Hawk. I want to talk to yuh."

"No, Senor Johnny," declined the Indian. "It would not be wise to let those sheepmen see me. Two of them are Beck and Duncan, the men who came to see Blaze Jorrum. They would know me."

"But, Hawk, I—I killed that man. I don't know what to do."

"I will tell you," called the invisible Blue Hawk in a sympathetic tone. "Go straight back to Mesquite and tell Wayne Morgan exactly what happened here. He will know what to do."

"What about you? Ain't you goin' back?"

"Later I go. Now I think it best that I remain here in hiding to watch these men. Tell Senor Morgan I do that, please."

"You know, Blue Hawk, if sheep come to Hackamore County there'll be a bloody war."

"That is true, Senor Johnny," comforted Blue Hawk, knowing the young sheriff was brooding over the man he had killed. "You did right. And do not worry about the sheep. The shepherds are setting up camp out there. They won't try to move now until they are sure you have been moved. You go straight to Wayne Morgan."

"All right, I will," Johnny promised.

Disconsolately he turned his horse and rode into the pass.

It was late at night by the time he reached town, but to his surprise he found his deputy at the Cowboy's Retreat. Morgan, for a change, was not talking with Flora. This late on a week night the dance hall wasn't open. Mark Croyden, too, was missing from his chair on the stair landing and nowhere in sight.

Morgan was standing at the back end of the bar, nursing along a schooner of beer and chatting with the second bartender. Johnny walked up in time to hear the last words.

"—but just in case. Be shore to keep yore shotgun handy, and tell all the other employees."

"Give me a straight whisky, Mike," Johnny ordered. "What yuh talkin' about, Wayne?"

"The Jorrums," Morgan told him. "I've got a hunch they're comin' to town soon. I've been warnin' all the storekeepers to be ready for trouble. We're not goin' to let that wild bunch ride over us roughshod."

"Oh," said Johnny, downing his whisky and not questioning the hunch. "I got to talk to yuh. Let's go over to the jail office."

Never had Johnny been as glad to see a person as he was to see his deputy. He hadn't realized how much he had grown to like and depend on Morgan. Under ordinary circumstances Johnny might have sought out Flora Drake and talked to her, but this was different. A fellow couldn't cry in a woman's lap over man's business.

IN THE privacy of the little office Johnny opened up and spilled the episode of the sheep flock in its entirety. Morgan listened without comment or recrimination.

"So Blue Hawk was right about Blaze Jorrum's deal with the unknown Mr. Bledsoe," was what he said. "I wonder if this Bledsoe has gone yet to Jorrum Mill to straighten out his Haglin ranch business with old Blaze. Croyden's missin' from his usual haunt tonight."

"Yuh still believe it's Mark Croyden," Johnny said dully. "Look, Wayne, three thousand sheep turned loose on the Haglin place would pollute Twisted Creek and ruin the Brules and Geary ranges for cattle."

"I know that, Johnny, but does Croyden know it? Anyway, I'm not sayin' for shore that Croyden's this mysterious Mr. Bledsoe. I just say he's tangled up in some sort of dirty scheme. No use broodin' over what yuh did, old son. It's probably good that yuh stopped those sheep."

It didn't look that way in the morning. It was after ten o'clock, and Johnny was waiting for Morgan to come in from his camp when Judge Garvey summoned him to the courthouse. Johnny went in the back way and ascended to the judge's suite. He found Garvey in such a cold rage that he felt as though he'd stepped into an ice-house.

"Young man," the judge, biting out his words like icicles, "at last you have gone too far. Not only have you been a colossal idiot, but you are in bad trouble."

"Sir? What d'yuh mean, Jude Garvey?"

"Look out that window!" said the judge, pointing. "See those two men going there on the other side of the street, stopping there in front of that grocery store?"

Johnny looked, and his heart sank as he recognized two of the four sheepmen he had halted at the pass yesterday afternoon.

"Their names are Sam Beck and Paul Duncan," went on the Judge's cold voice. "They have just left this office. They came here to lodge a complaint against you. They have a valid lease to the Haglin range, and you barred their path without authority. When they tried to pass, you shot and killed one of their companions. Have you anything to say for yourself?"

Johnny gulped. "Only this, Judge Garvey. They was runnin' sheep into this cow country. I only meant to stop them, to

prevent bloodshed."

"Prevent bloodshed!" The Judge's voice was bitter. "You shed the blood, Winfield. Sheep or goats or hopping horned toads, those men have the legal right to bring them in."

"But, Judge Garvey," Johnny protested faintly, "I thought you'd be the first man to stand against them. You got the best cattle ranch in the county. You ain't a sheepman."

"Which has nothing to do with the legality of the matter. Of course, I hate sheep, but I also represent law and order. While you, the sheriff of this county, have abused your own high office. I don't think Beck and Duncan can make you stand trial for murder, but you're through as sheriff. I am taking the proper steps immediately to divest you of office. Whatever made me appoint a blundering young ass like you in the first place I cannot imagine! Now get out of here!"

Johnny opened and closed his mouth several times without uttering a sound. Then he turned and started for the door.

"I'll tell you what you'd better do," the Judge fired a parting shot after him. "You'd better go talk to Duncan and Beck right now before they leave town and try to make your peace with them. Apologize for acting without a warrant and talk them out of making you legal trouble."

This was the last straw. Disgraced, ruined, stripped of his office, in the worst possible standing with the one man he was most desirous of pleasing, Johnny realized he was further away from attaining Robin O'Neal than he had ever been. And now to have to eat crow for a pair of sheepmen!

This was the end of the world. . . .

THIS morning was meant to be the end of the world for Johnny Winfield, only he didn't know it. Beck and Duncan, halted before the window of Carter's Grocery and facing each other so that, between them, they could watch both ways of the street, were talking in the short, clipped, terse way of men on the verge of action. They didn't see the woman just inside the door who was looking over the grocer's meager supply of green vegetables. It was Flora Drake.

"He ought to be up in Judge Garvey's office catchin' it right now," Beck said.

"Yeh. What if he goes out the back?"

"We run him down. But he won't. He'll come lookin' for us. How'll we play it now?"

"You stroll across and meet him at the foot of the steps," Duncan said. "String him along. Say somethin' to make him go for his guns. Start a fight if he don't. I'll go over to the corner of the courthouse where I can cut him down as he draws."

"Keno," Beck agreed. "Watch out for that new deputy. The boss said he's the hairpin that's dangerous. Ain't seen him today."

"Nope. Got our story straight? He comes down from the Judge's office on the prod at us for makin' complaint. He meets yuh at the courthouse steps and tries to kill yuh. I have to down him to save yore life."

"Check," Beck said. "Let's get set."

They separated, Beck to angle aimlessly across the street toward the courthouse building, and Duncan to walk directly over to take up an idler's pose at the corner where he could look along the main street and keep an eye along one side of the county building.

Flora, her attention riveted at their first words, had not moved during the colloquy, fearing to attract their attention. Now she drew a tremulous breath and looked out after the pair.

She knew they were planning a gun trap, but for whom? And why? What should she do about it? What *could* she do?

Her eyes darting rapidly around like frightened birds in search of some sort of masculine aid, her mind was working like lightning. And then she saw a man's booted feet descending the courthouse steps in a slow, despondent fashion—like a small boy who has been severely reprimanded.

Flora's heart seemed to fly up to her throat, threatening to choke her. She knew before she saw the descending man's face who it was. And she knew it was the very man the two killers meant to gun-trap.

Beck had reached the middle of the sidewalk before the steps. He halted to light a cigarette. Duncan, at the near corner of the courthouse, took his cue from this action and stood erect, taking

one last glance along the building and loosening his gun in its holster. Then Johnny Winfield reached the bottom step of the wide stairs.

"No! *No!* Oh, Johnny, no, no!" the woman screamed silently in the depths of her heart.

At the same moment she was in flight. Picking up her skirts, she ran as fast as she could move diagonally across the street.

She flashed by Beck like a shadow and flung herself at the sheriff just as Duncan, startled by her appearance, jerked out his six-shooter and raised it high to drop to a bead on his victim.

"Turn back, Johnny!" she panted, flinging her arms about his neck and turning him to face toward Duncan so that her own body shielded him. "Oh, run, my dear! They mean to kill you!"

CHAPTER XIII

Flora Drake's Secret

DUNCAN fired a bit hastily to beat Flora Drake's maneuver. The bullet struck the woman in the back, knocking her flat against the sheriff, her breath coming in broken gasps.

Johnny felt the thud of the slug as his arms went around the dance hall woman to hold her, and his heart ached in a sudden, fierce agony of regret. He fell to the lowest step, holding his limp burden.

Duncan, cursing, started forward. He never fired another shot. There was the bellow of a .45 from the opposite or side street corner of the courthouse. Hot lead tore through the space between Beck and the seated Johnny. It took Duncan squarely in the face and jerked off his hat as it went out the back of his head.

Beck belatedly came to the party. Not a man to think as fast as the more quarrelsome Duncan, the change in the planned play messed up his gun practise. He snatched out his own six-shooter as he saw Johnny drop down with this woman who had come out of nowhere. Out of the tail of his eye he saw his partner plunging headlong, and he turned his gun toward the corner where Wayne Morgan had just arrived from the jail down the side street.

They fired simultaneously. It was Beck's unlucky day. His slug richocheted off the cornerstone of the building at Morgan's shoulder. Morgan's bullet richocheted off Beck's breast bone—to the left.

That was the gun battle. Short, swift, savage.

His face terrible, Wayne Morgan ran forward. He was cursing himself for not having come to town earlier this morning. He might have prevented this tragedy. But he had been waiting at the camp against Blue Hawk's possible arrival with more complete information about the sheepherders. Blue Hawk had not returned, and Morgan had come on to town. Learning from the jailer that Johnny had gone to see Judge Garvey, Morgan had been walking around from the jailhouse—on Duncan's blind side—when the two killers had sprung their trap on the sheriff.

Kneeling beside the helpless Johnny who seemed able to do nothing except hold the unconscious woman in his arms, Morgan saw the spreading red blot on her back with dismay. Tenderly but firmly he gathered her up into his own strong arms and rose to his feet.

"Confound you, Johnny Winfield!" he growled. "She gave her life for you, and all yuh do is sit like a cross-legged owl and let her bleed to death in yore arms. Run and find Doc Winelow! I'll take her to his office. Hurry!"

The handling had aroused the wounded woman. Her eyelids fluttered open and her great green-gray eyes, startling against her pale cheeks, looked up at him. Morgan was unaware that she was conscious as he stared after the hastening sheriff.

"Danged young idiot!" he growled. "To think she had to fall for a kid like him. The decent thing to do would have been to tell her about Robin O'Neal. Mebbe it won't matter now."

"No, Morgan," her voice whispered at his shoulder, "it doesn't matter. It never did matter. I knew about Robin all the time. You—had it figured wrong. Johnny doesn't know it, but—but I'm—his—mother."

Striding along as smoothly as he could

toward the medico's office upstairs over the bank, Morgan glanced down at her face.

"I'm a prize idiot," he finally said. "I should have guessed."

"Why?" she murmured faintly. "Nobody else knew but Ma Chryson."

The doctor and Johnny were coming from the drug store. They met at the stairway and Dr. Winelow took one look at Flora Drake's pallid features, seeing at the same time the little rivulets of bright blood trickling along Morgan's right arm and dripping to the sidewalk.

"Hurry up to my office and lay her on the table before she bleeds to death," he instructed.

"Want help, Wayne?" panted Johnny anxiously.

"No, but tell me what happened," said Morgan, climbing the steps two at a time.

He placed the woman as the doctor directed, and the physician went deftly to work. Johnny told Morgan of the morning's developments.

"I think I'm beginnin' to understand, pardner," Morgan said when Johnny had finished. "You stay here with Flora while I see to that pair of polecats down in the street. I'll be back as soon as possible. Doc, is she—is she all right?"

"How the devil can I tell?" growled Dr. Winelow, already checking the wound. "She's been shot through the right lung. No vital spots hit so far's I know. If I can stop the internal bleeding, if there's no infection, if pneumonia doesn't set in she may be all right. If you gunslingers knew how much grief and trouble you caused you'd be more careful about drilling holes."

MORGAN left and legged it back to the scene of the gunfight. A crowd was gathering, but Morgan's intense blue eyes lighted up at sight of Blue Hawk. The Indian, having materialized from some place known only to himself, was coming from Beck's body to that of Duncan. He bent over Duncan for a brief inspection and stood erect as Morgan approached.

"They are both dead, Senor," he reported succinctly. "Beck and Duncan, the two sheepmen I told you of. But they are not sheepmen; they are cattle workers, like I told you. I sneaked into their camp after dark last night and spied on them. I followed them to town this morning. But what I overheard last night is what you must know. They are in the pay of the Raftered G."

Morgan looked sharply at his bronzed aide and slowly nodded. Everything suddenly fell into place in his mind. He understood all parts of the puzzle now. All he had to do was make the culprit admit his guilt or somehow betray himself.

"Hawk, get help and get these bodies to the undertakin' parlor right away. I've got to see Mark Croyden. I've put that off too long."

He turned and headed briskly along the street to the Cowboy's Retreat. For a wonder he beat the detailed news of the gunfight back to the establishment. Mark Croyden was pacing the stair landing like a restless tiger in his cage. He whirled and leaned intently forward as the deputy sheriff entered the house.

"I understand there's been a little gunplay up by the courthouse, Morgan," he said. "Anybody I know?"

"That's what I'm here to find out, Croyden," Morgan told him. "Grab yore hat and come with me. I know just the place where we can talk privately."

"The jail?" Croyden asked softly.

"Nope. The undertaker's. This is not an arrest—not yet."

Croyden was deliberate enough about it. He studied the deputy for a long space, perhaps weighing his chances in a shoot-out here and now. If so, he thought better of it.

"We can talk privately upstairs in my office," he said. "Will you come up?"

"No, thanks. My place is best. I want to show yuh somethin'."

"All right." Croyden capitulated with a shrug.

The funeral parlor, two blocks west of the courthouse, was one block west of the Cowboy's Retreat. The bodies of Beck and Duncan had just been brought in when the two men got there. Ordering everybody else outside, the deputy sheriff posted Blue Hawk and the undertaker on guard at the doors and showed his companion the unlovely pair of corpses.

"Beck—Duncan," he said briefly. "Know 'em, Croyden?"

The saloon owner stared down at the two dead faces, one badly marred by a bluish bullet-hole, without a quiver of reaction.

"No," he denied calmly. "I may have seen them before, but I doubt it. I don't remember it."

"I didn't think yuh knew 'em. Just an off chance. But yuh know the man they worked for plumb well. In fact, yuh had a pardnership deal with him that went sour recently."

"You'll have to speak plainer, Morgan," said Croyden, sighing. "I don't go in for guessing games."

"I'll make it to the point," Morgan agreed. "Make yore play whenever it gets to stickin' yuh too sharp, but I'm advisin' yuh not to try anything unless yuh're pretty fast with a gun. Yuh were in a pardnership with Judge Ben Garvey to found a cattle empire out of Hackamore County. Except for what part of Jorrum Creek land lies in this county and the Haglin ranch, yuh've already got hold of the northern half of the county between yuh."

"Go on," said Croyden, as Morgan paused to marshal his array of facts and accusations.

"Yuh planned to get most of the land, usin' whatever methods yuh had to. The Judge likely puttin' up his full share of operatin' cash which I have no doubt he's been stealin' from his ward, was the silent pardner who, as county judge, steered you clear of the law and covered up for and protected yuh if and when yuh needed it."

"Interesting," Croyden murmured. "You've heard of whole cloth, Mr. Morgan?"

"Yes. So, when Sheriff Baylor was killed, you boys thought it a fine idea to slide a simple puppet into the sheriff's job. But Johnny Winfield, anxious to marry the Judge's ward, has been a poor choice. Especially to Judge Garvey. For the Judge has planned a nice doublecross for you, Croyden. Under the name of Bledsoe he made a private deal with Blaze Jorrum on the Haglin range. Oh, I know yuh knew about the general set-up and the water squeeze, so yuh could pick up the Brules and Geary ranches at a bargain. But yuh didn't know Garvey was running sheep on the Haglin place to ruin all three ranches for cattle!"

CROYDEN didn't flinch under this, but his lips tightened and his long face grew longer. Morgan continued pouring it on.

"This would leave you holdin' the bag with a lot of land not worth half what yuh paid for it. It looks plain enough that the Judge, usin' both you and Blaze Jorrum as cat's paws, aims to freeze yuh out and pick up yore land cheap for his sheep empire."

"This is a fantastic story, Morgan," said Croyden.

"Is it? With three thousand sheep just north of the Haglin range ready to pour in? Johnny rode up there yesterday and killed one of the herders to stop the run. Here are two others lyin' before you that I had to kill because Judge Garvey used 'em to set a guntrap for the sheriff. Johnny finally got to be more than a nuisance worry to the Judge. He got to be a danger, so he had to be stopped. That's why there was a gunfight a while ago in the street and Flora Drake was badly wounded tryin' to save Johnny's life."

For the first time Croyden reacted. This last had flicked him on the raw.

"Flora Drake? Flora was shot?"

"Take it easy, Croyden. She's in Doc Winelow's hands. She ought to pull through. I just wanted to show yuh what a big chump yuh are. I don't have any criminal evidence against yuh, and we both know it. But you're the man who can give me what legal evidence we need against Ben Garvey so we can nab him before he plunges Hackamore County into a bloody stock war. How about it, mister?"

Having presented his case, Morgan fell silent. He watched the betrayed saloon owner intently. Croyden gazed at him without speaking, looking for a long moment at the two bodies before him, then bringing his eyes back to Morgan. Whatever struggle was taking place within him did not show on the surface. He had his emotions under iron control.

Morgan knew, however, what seething thoughts must be rushing through Croyden's mind. This was not the first time the Robin Hood outlaw had seen the plans of a strong man come down in ruins about him. What hopes, what cherished

dreams of a cowland paradise, what lifelong ambition shattered into dust behind Mark Croyden's inscrutable face? What plans of empire were obliterated by the sharp, black little hoofs of three thousand head of bleating sheep? And a crooked partner.

At last Croyden stirred. "Which one of the dogs shot her?" he asked, and that was all he said.

Before Morgan could answer him there broke upon their ears a sound of pandemonium. Muffled somewhat by the house walls there were the mingled noises of galloping hoofs, gunfire, and the wild shouts of hard-riding men. Gun thunder and hoof thunder rose in a swift crescendo, swept by in the street, and rocked the town to its foundations.

Both men whirled toward the front of the funeral parlor with one accord. Blue Hawk came running to meet them.

"Senor!" he cried. "The men of Jorrum Creek! They are raiding the town!"

CHAPTER XIV

The Jorrum Raid

RIOT rather than a raid. In broad daylight, the men from Jorrum Creek, some thirty strong, with old Blaze Jorrum himself at their head, had invaded Mesquite. The pot had at last boiled over.

The Jorrums didn't care a hoot about individual ambitions, dirty schemes, land deals, politics, or sheep; they had come to town to clean house. The killing of Bearcat Mahoney, no matter who the killer or what the circumstances, had been the last straw.

But the town was not caught completely unprepared. Thanks to the new deputy sheriff's warning and his war counsel of the day before, at the first outbreak of gunfire—that brief but lethal fight in front of the courthouse—merchants had started barricading their store fronts and unlimbering shotguns, rifles, and revolvers of every caliber.

Women and children were hastily bundled off the streets and snuggled down in featherbeds or huddled in storm cellars. The word that it was a false alarm had not had time to spread around before the Jorrums did arrive.

In the back room of the funeral parlor Wayne Morgan took swift command.

"Hawk," he said significantly, "we need reinforcements. You know what to do. I'm stayin' in town to help the citizens put up their defense. Croyden, what side are you on? A leader is needed on each side of the main street. If I take one side, will you take the other?"

Croyden was already moving toward the back door.

"You clean up your own dunghill, Morgan," he growled. "I'll clean up mine."

With the safety of so many people depending on him, Morgan could waste no more time on the affairs of Croyden and Judge Garvey. Although Johnny Winfield had started the Jorrum pot to boiling, it had been the Masked Rider who had precipitated final disaster by killing Bearcat Mahoney. Therefore, it was up to Wayne Morgan and/or the Masked Rider to meet the present crisis. After this danger—no less a menace because it was a side issue—had been averted he could return to the greater problem of the crooked partners and the looming cattle-sheep feud.

The three men separated behind the mortuary, Croyden running along the alley toward his own place of business, Blue Hawk to get his horse and ride for the hideout, and Morgan to sprint across the street and gather up fighting citizens as he led the way toward the courthouse. For it was at the courthouse that the focal point became fixed.

The Jorrum band, having swept through town like a whirlwind, shooting out window panes and scaring everybody off the main street, had halted at the far end of the street and returned to gather before the county building. Old Blaze Jorrum, mounted on a big, broad-beamed chestnut gelding, had climbed up to stand on his saddle and was shouting at the windows of Judge Garvey's law offices.

Morgan, gathering up angry and determined merchants as he went along, directed them to encircle the entire courthouse block, taking up vantage points in house windows, on roofs, and everywhere they could safely group in drawing the cordon tight. Running on, as he neared the bank building across the street from

the Cowboy's Retreat, Morgan studied the milling mob of Jorrums thronging the street before the courthouse.

He made out the massive figures of the Mitchell brothers and the slim form of Sugar Babe Jorrum at the edge of the crowd. They seemed on the verge of withdrawing and heading toward the Croyden place, but were waiting to hear the outcome of old Blaze Jorrum's parley.

Because of the general noise and confusion Morgan could not distinguish the words of the old hellion's harangue. But he did see Judge Garvey suddenly appear at his central window and wave his hands to quiet the crowd.

DASHING up the stairs to the doctor's office, Morgan found the medico stolidly and prosaically finishing up with Flora Drake. Johnny was at the front window looking out on the disturbance down at the courthouse.

"Fine thing!" said Morgan, coming up behind him. "A young riot breaks out in yore own bailiwick and you just take a ringside seat and look on. You started all this Jorrum trouble yoreself, yuh know."

"Yeah, but Judge Garvey kicked me out of my job this mornin'," Johnny said gloomily. "Besides, he didn't want me to bother the Jorrums any more."

"He said he was goin' to kick yuh out," Morgan snapped. "He hasn't done it yet, and he's never going to do it. It's Judge Garvey who's through, pardner."

"Yuh talk like a crazy man," said Johnny without turning his head. "Listen!"

The tumult was dying away under the presence of the white-headed Judge Garvey in the window. Words could now be distinguished.

"What do you want, Blaze Jorrum?" The Judge's voice floated faintly but clearly along the block to the bank corner.

"I want justice!" yelled the old man standing in his saddle in the street below, his bell-toned voice carrying strongly. "One of my men's been killed. An eye for an eye! Give me that young whippersnapper of a sheriff in exchange and swear to keep all lawmen out of Jorrum Creek country, and we'll ride off peaceable. Don't do it, and we'll burn this dang town down!"

The Jorrums set up a clamor of applause. Judge Garvey finally waved them to silence. He neither temporized nor beat about the brush.

"All right," he called wearily. "Take him, Blaze Jorrum, and withdraw from Mesquite without any more bloodshed."

"Where is he?" demanded the old man.

The Judge made an apologetic gesture. "I don't know. You'll have to find him. He's no longer county sheriff."

Another outburst, this time with a growing note of anger. It was Blaze Jorrum who quelled the noise now by a commanding movement of his hand.

"Yuh ain't playin' any more tricks on the Jorrums, Ben Garvey!" he shouted. "Until we find Johnny Winfield we'll just take you as hostage. Run up them stairs and grab him, boys!"

Half a dozen men surged forward like a black wave toward the wide courthouse steps. Judge Garvey wasted no time in startled protest. He fell back from the window and disappeared from sight. Morgan knew he was scurrying through the big courtroom and heading for the back stairs to escape the Jorrum mob.

The deputy sheriff tapped his companion on the shoulder.

"Come on, Johnny," he said. "Get yore guns. We got work to do."

Down in the street fighting began once more. Whether it was the Jorrum faction or the townsmen who started it made no difference. But as many of the Jorrum bunch invaded the courthouse it looked like a perfect time to rush them and bottle them up. So the cordon of incensed citizens tightened, and gunfire rocked the town.

At the rear of the courthouse Walter Gimp, the fat little jailer, proved himself an able lieutenant. Energetically directing operations from the flat top of the adobe jail, he managed to get the county building pretty well cut off and surrounded. In back, however, Judge Garvey escaped the cordon, and in front Sugar Babe Jorrum and the Mitchell brothers did likewise.

Old Blaze Jorrum was an able commander himself. As soon as he noted the heavy firing from all sides, he ordered his men into the courthouse where they

took up positions all around the windows of the upper floor and proceeded to fight off the attack in grim and bitter determination. A steady siege of gunfire ensued, pockmarking store fronts, breaking windows, and bringing bloody casualties on both sides.

Just how the tide of battle would have turned remained in doubt until there was a renewed burst of firing beyond the courthouse. A band of horsemen, led by a black-clad and masked man on a magnificent black stallion came thundering into the fight.

"The Masked Rider—the Masked Rider!" shouted dazed and excited men on each side.

THE Masked Rider had gathered up cow hands from the neighboring ranches to the north of town and was leading them in a savage counter-attack to save the county seat. Foremost in the mounted troop were Brules, Geary, and Haglin. With the proper man to lead them, they were fighting valiantly to clean up the county of both Jorrums and crooked sheepmen.

The reinforcements decided the fight. The group of Jorrum men who had remained on the ground floor of the courthouse to hold the horses broke and fled. Most of them were either shot down or captured. The Masked Rider reined up his mount in the middle of the cross street and shouted a warning at old Blaze Jorrum at the top of the courthouse steps.

"Surrender, Jorrum!" he yelled in a deep, gruff voice which was surprisingly like that of Blue Hawk. "Give up before your men are all killed!"

Blaze Jorrum, rough old hellion that he was, was no maniac. He knew when he was licked.

"Cease firin', boys!" he ordered, a command that flashed from mouth to mouth all over the beleaguered courthouse. "They got us in a pocket. I never knew a bunch of flatlanders to put up such a fight over one measly sheriff."

Down in the stairwell of the bank building where they had been participating in the gun battle Johnny Winfield said to Wayne Morgan:

"Gosh, the Masked Rider! You know, Wayne, I was beginnin' to wonder some about you, but this clears that up."

"Yes, this clears that up," Morgan agreed grimly. "But everything else hasn't been cleared up yet. Yuh saw Sugar Babe and the Mitchell boys scootin' along across there. They wasn't runnin' from the fight, Johnny. They're lookin' for you—and me. They just went into the Cowboy's Retreat. Do we go finish that fracas yuh started last week?"

"Let's go," Johnny said.

CHAPTER XV

Partnership Dissolved

NOW, in the Cowboy's Retreat, another matter had come to a climax. Two men were dissolving partnership. Upstairs in his office, oblivious to the gunfire around the courthouse only one block away, Mark Croyden was sitting at his desk and going through a mass of personal papers.

He took his time, destroying many and carefully putting others aside. Slowly he acquired a considerable little pile of documents—letters, notes, agreements, contracts, mortgages—concerning the business shenanigans of Mark Croyden and Judge Ben Garvey which, in the right hands, could damn both men as being crooks.

Having gathered these incriminatory papers together, the saloon owner sifted through them once more, his long face bleak. Then he stared off into space for a moment, holding the papers folded in one hand.

For the irony of it all was that, legally, neither man could be touched by the law for what they had done. Without these papers now in his hands no man could bring even the breath of suspicion against the upright figure of Judge Garvey. To use these papers to discredit the jurist meant the corresponding ruin of Mark Croyden. There was no way to nail Ben Garvey's hide to the wall without crucifying himself.

Wayne Morgan had not known what he was asking. But he had used two of the most powerful arguments he could possibly have found—the ruthless shattering of a dream of cattle empire and the

unfortunate shooting of the only woman Mark Croyden had ever loved.

Mark Croyden began to laugh, a harsh, grating sound. Abruptly he thrust the papers into a big envelope and shoved the bulky package into the inside breast pocket of his frock coat. He got to his feet, peeled back his coat and took a long-barreled .38 six-shooter from its hip holster. He examined the gun with scrupulous care, saw that it was fully loaded, shoved it back where it belonged.

Taking a final look around to make sure everything was left in order here in this room where he had dreamed most of his dreams and planned most of his schemes, he went out, shutting the door behind him.

Striding rearward along the hall to the stairhead, he came face to face with the man foremost in his thoughts

"Mark!" cried Judge Garvey, panting from his stair-climbing exertions. "Man, I'm glad to see you!"

Croyden halted and lay his left hand on the end of the bannister rail, staring without visible change of expression down at the face of the man on the second step. As he didn't speak, the Judge hurried on.

"All Hades has broken loose over at the courthouse, Mark. Old Blaze Jorrum—"

"It's broken loose generally, Judge Garvey," Croyden said harshly. "Otherwise, you'd never come openly to my place. Not the upright Benjamin Garvey who execrates the saloon operator publicly, and doublecrosses him as a partner privately."

Judge Garvey, despite his desperate hurry, took enough time to dissemble. "What are you talking about, Mark? This is no time for us to worry about being seen together. We've got to—"

"Sheep!" said Croyden bluntly, cutting him off again. "Sheep are on my mind, Garvey."

The Judge's jaw dropped. He recovered instantly.

"I can explain that, Mark. I wasn't doublecrossing you. I was only using Jorrum and Beck and Duncan as tools to keep you and me in the background."

"Three thousand sheep," said Croyden.

The Judge licked his lips. His shrewd eyes began to flicker. There was something ominous here.

"I'm cutting you in fifty-fifty, Mark," he said earnestly. "You know we're full partners."

"Our deal was cattle only, Garvey. And this morning your private gunslingers set a trap for the kid sheriff at your orders—and got Flora Drake."

"I didn't—" began the Judge.

"I'm giving the sheriff all the evidence of our partnership."

"Mark! You can't do that. You—you wouldn't! It means you, too."

"Both of us'll go down together, Garvey. Down these stairs, too. Turn around and get going."

JUDGE GARVEY looked wildly up into that implacable face. Seeing adamantine resolve written there, the Judge took the only out he could see. He drew a derringer from his pocket and shot up at Croyden through the spindles of the bannister railing. The deadly little slug barely tipped one hardwood spindle, deflected, and cut through the back of Croyden's coat, burning a crease partly across the small of the saloon man's back.

With the speed and dexterity of long practise, Croyden peeled back his coat, drew his .38, and shot his partner through the right temple. The Judge stood there for an instant swaying slowly, a funny black hole in his wide sideburn. Then, just as the blood spurted from the wound, he stiffened convulsively and toppled backward. He fell all the way down the steps, bringing up in a shuddering thump against the railing of the stair landing. A definite dissolution of partnership.

Ignoring the smarting pain in his back, Mark Croyden slowly descended the stairs after him.

Down on the first floor, in a cleared space before the bar, Sugar Babe Jorrum and the Mitchell brothers jerked around at the sound of gunfire above them. They saw the flabby body of the Judge bring up against the railing just as the batwings popped open and the sheriff and his big deputy stalked into the room and parted left and right. The eyes of the Jorrum contingent jerked quickly back to the front, widening in apprehension at what they saw.

"Looking for us, boys?" Morgan asked in laconic tones.

"Yeah—shore!" whined Sugar Babe Jorrum. His hands dropped down for his guns. They came up shooting.

Little Mitch and Big Mitch followed as though they were geared to the same mechanism that inspired their leader.

But it was all foolishness. Wayne Morgan was one of the fastest gun swifts the West had ever known. His first bullet almost tore off Sugar Babe's jaw. The shot from his second gun busted Little Mitch's belt buckle and broke his fighting spirit forever. Big Mitch was better at rough-and-tumble evidently than with a shooting iron. He came off second best with Johnny who put one slug through his collarbone and one through his left thigh.

That settled things. Silence fell like a pall while acrid gun smoke drifted away. Morgan strode forward to estimate the damage. Johnny Winfield grimly followed.

"I'm afraid nothin' can be done for Little Mitch," Morgan said in genuine regret. "Better get Sugar Babe and Big Mitch to Doc Winelow right quick."

"Yeah," endorsed Johnny. "Us gunslingers been drillin' holes again. Sugar Babe Jorrum, this time yuh're goin' to jail, and yuh'll have plenty of Jorrum company with yuh."

Big Mitch looked up at the hard face of the deputy sheriff. "Yuh're the fastest man with a gun," he admitted in a hoarse whisper, "but I ain't never been whipped in a fair and square fist fight."

"Sorry, Big Mitch," said Morgan. "Mebbe we can finish it some other day."

He holstered his guns and walked over to the foot of the stairs and looked at the Judge's body on the landing. Mark Croyden had just descended the last step and stood there above the body looking at the carnage in his saloon.

It was Morgan who spoke first.

"So somebody finally accepted an invitation to visit yore office, Croyden? How'd he like the color scheme?"

The saloon owner's eyes fixed themselves on the deputy's face. His hand went into his inside breast pocket and came out with the envelope of incriminating papers.

"He didn't like it, Morgan," he said in his deliberate way. "He knew I was turning this evidence over to you and he tried to kill me. I shot straighter, but I'm not claiming self-defense. Here's the stuff you asked me for."

Morgan looked at the envelope without taking it.

"The Judge is dead, ain't he?"

Croyden merely indicated the body of his former partner. His facial grimace was eloquent.

"I think justice has been served," Morgan went on. "Better destroy them papers, Croyden. No use givin' 'em to the sheriff. He's got his hands full of Jorrum business. You and I can just forget the talk we had."

A light of gratitude slowly dawned on Mark Croyden's face. He restored the envelope to his inside pocket.

"Yuh might run over to Doc Winelow's office, too," Morgan added. "His last report was that Flora has a pretty good chance."

"Thanks, Morgan," Croyden murmured. "I reckon you know I'll not pick up the Brules and Geary options. And I'll straighten out the rest of Garvey's crooked deals."

Morgan nodded. He cast a look at the busy young sheriff. Johnny was going to have his hands full for many a day, but he had settled down in the saddle now. He'd make it all right. Especially with two such women as Flora and Robin pulling for him.

The deputy sheriff turned about and headed for the door. Johnny saw him.

"Hay, Wayne!" he called. "Where yuh goin' now? Ain't the fightin' over?"

"Yuh bet it is, pardner," Morgan agreed. "I just got to see a man about a black hoss."

The batwings flapped behind him.

Later in the day, when Johnny looked for his deputy, his *segundo* was nowhere to be found. Which was not surprising. For far away Wayne Morgan and the indispensable Blue Hawk were chousing a little remuda of horses, which included a magnificent black stallion, into the sunset.

Next Issue: Wayne Morgan in APACHE PLUNDER, by Walker A. Tompkins

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When Figgerit caught a glint from the timber, he pulled the gelding around in a violent whirl

When mysterious death haunts
the rancher neighbors of Figgerit Parker,
he swings into a gun-roaring fight for land and water!

an action novelet by TOM CURRY

CHAPTER I
In Line for a Bullet

THE spot of green was what first caught "Figgerit" Clint Parker's keen gray eye as he rode his buckskin gelding Rube near the boundary between his 1 2 Ranch and Harwell Murphy's M Bar.

It attracted him because it did not blend with the natural tones of the region, and Clint Parker had a curiosity which had to be slaked. That was how he had earned his nickname. "Let's figger it!" he would say earnestly. Friends had come to depend on him along such lines, since his perception was quick and he could reason out a problem.

When he had drawn close enough he saw that the green patch was a shirt, and that inside the shirt was a man, lying in such an attitude that even before Figgerit dismounted he knew the man was dead.

Besides the wool shirt the stiffened form was clad in whipcord pants tucked into spurred boots, an open vest and a spotted bandanna. He had been a big fel-

DRYGULCHER RANGE

low with a broad face and brown mustache, and a good neighbor of Parker's. Here reposed what was left of Harwell Murphy, owner of the M Bar.

"I don't like this, Murph," growled Figgerit, as though the man who had been his friend could hear.

Clint Parker was strong and calm by nature, and looked it. He had crisp black hair under the curved Stetson he wore, and his rangy figure was set off by leather trousers and a brown shirt.

After bending over Murphy he straightened to his full six-foot-three and reached for his battered briar pipe, filling it from a rattlesnakeskin pouch. The shredded dark tobacco he stuffed into the caked bowl was strong enough to kill a mule, but Figgerit was used to it, and puffing at his pipe was conducive to thought.

First he looked all around because whoever had done this killing might possibly be lurking in the immediate vicinity. There were plenty of places where a man

might lie in ambush through the broken stretches lining Tule River. The Tule, a tributary of the mighty Red, was one of the rare waterbreaks in the vast Texas Panhandle, and distantly Figgerit could hear the roar of Tule Falls.

Hemming in the shallow valley the stream had made in bygone eras, and the present interior course were the rolling expanses of the plains, to the west the Llando Estacado, on the north and northeast the Red River basin. South lay more of Texas, hundreds of miles of it, running on and on to the Rio Grande.

FIGGERIT shivered as though a cold spell had hit him. It was a shock to find Harwell Murphy with a bullet from a high-powered rifle through him.

"Yuh're the second, Murph!"

He looked down, a habit of his when figuring on something. He was not too proud to watch his step and often sign showed on the ground.

The green shirt had been ripped over Harwell's hairy chest and one side had been torn, the threads pulled as though something had snagged there. The rifle slug had done the trick but the drygulcher had taken the pains to ride in and crouch beside his victim. All this was obvious to a trained eye, although the immediate shale held few indentations.

Carved by a sharp knife on the dead man was a strange design, rather like an "S" backward, with a slash slanted through it. Figgerit knew it was supposedly an old Indian sign used by a tribe which once had dominated the Staked Plain and the Panhandle.

"Revenge!" grunted Parker. "This time it don't make sense, Murph."

Having seen all there was to see around the body, he picked up Rube's rein and moved to a patch of rocks where he felt safe to smoke and concentrate on a summary of the situation.

He could find little comfort in anything. Not only was he sorry to lose Murphy, but he was stricken at thought of how the dead man's wife, Della, would be hurt. There were two small children, and Figgerit knew that his friend had had no cash reserves, any more than he did.

The ranchers had just been skinning by, hemmed in by wheat fields planted by the Palo Flour Company's tenant farmers. The year before the ranchers had been forced to great expense in fencing the range so cattle could not damage the grain.

The cowmen had been there first, but according to custom had obtained title only to sections adjoining the Tule. In their business land without access to plenty of potable water was useless, but the wheat growers were in a different line. A spring or small feeder could satisfy their personal needs and the few work animals they owned. They were strangling the ranches, had made future expansion impossible.

Clouds of smoke drifted into the warm air from the malodorous pipe as Clint Parker thought on. About three weeks back, he and Harwell Murphy had picked up the corpse of Old Man Dan Williams, first of the three Tule ranchers to die. Figgerit and Murph had talked it over, and in his imagination Figgerit could see his friend, vibrant with interest and strength, squatting across from him and gesturing with his big brown hands to emphasize a point.

"It's revenge, that's what it is, Figgerit!" Murph had said. "Somebody came after pore Dan. That funny slash proves it. Mebbe he belonged to a wild bunch when he was younger."

This vision of Murphy's honest face and clean, steady eyes was nostaligically clear to Parker.

The sign on Murphy was the same as that on Williams. Old Dan had been a widower who could have had a past out of which vicious foes might creep, but this was different.

"Who could be Murph's enemy!" Parker thought. He had known Murphy too well, from the start, to believe in a hidden enemy.

Figgerit had never held it against Harwell Murphy for having won Della. It had been a fair contest, two young fellows competing for a pretty schoolma'am's favor, and Murphy had been chosen. That had been eight years back and Figgerit, now nearing thirty, had never married.

Williams, Murphy and Figgerit had owned the Tule water range. Two were gone, done in by the same method.

"Why, I'm the last of the Mohicans!" Figgerit thought. He glanced over his

shoulder, but a gunslinger would have to creep close to down him there in the rocks. "I'm next, I reckon."

He grew more and more certain that he would be the third and final victim. According to logic he must be. He could envision them finding him, shot through, with the mark on him.

"Pore Figgerit!" someone would remark. "Wonder who had it in for him? Yuh s'pose he was once a member of an outlaw band and one of 'em come for him when he got out of prison?"

He rose and knocked his pipe against a rock, careful to stamp out all of the sparks.

"I got to locate that killer," he muttered.

Murphy and Williams rated it and there was also the matter of self-preservation. He would have to figure it perfectly, track down the mysterious enemy before that enemy could line him up in the sights of his heavy rifle.

CAREFULLY Figgerit checked his carbine. His narrowed eyes hunted the horizon as he threw a long leg over Rube and started following faint marks left by a mustang which had come in and then gone out from a point close to Murphy's remains.

These led him roughly east to where a brush-fringed ridge loomed not too far off. A second set of hoofprints headed south toward Murphy's cabin, but Parker concluded they had been made by his friend's mount wandering on home after his rider had been dropped from the saddle.

At the base of the ridge he pulled up and, taking his carbine, snaked up the slope at an angle. After a search he discovered the spot where a man had waited in the bushes.

Yet there was nothing to help him to identify the dry gulcher, so he remounted and started back.

From the height he could see for miles around. In every direction wheat crowded the cattle range, waving, brownish-yellow seas of it. The winding river had cut its bed, leaving heaps of jumbled rocks overgrown by woods and brush. Smoke stained the clear air, from the settlement of Tule City, a metropolis in hope only, with its fixed population of seventy so-called souls, while a faint spiral marked Murphy's cook fire, and others at wheat-growers' shacks.

Two horsemen came slowly wending a way in from the south, not far from Tule. They broke into view close enough so that Figgerit recognized them as Willie Morse and "Bink" Green, cowboys employed by the late Harwell Murphy.

"Lookin' for him," decided Parker. "I reckon his hoss got back."

He went to join them, singing out and pointing toward the dead man. Back at the M Bar Della would be waiting, her anxiety tinged with hope that her husband had not been seriously injured. She would keep telling herself that perhaps the mustang had thrown him, or escaped in some other manner.

Bink and Willie were lean young men in leather and big hats. They were well-acquainted with Figgerit Clint Parker and held him in great respect. After profane grief at finding their employer done in, they listened carefully to Figgerit's account of what must have occurred. They could add nothing that might help clear up the problem.

"I ain't got the heart to tell the missus, Willie," groaned Bink glumly. "You do it. Yuh got a better gift of gab than I have."

Willie swore hotly at his partner. "Yeah, always handin' me the hard jobs! I notice when it comes to the girls in town yuh can bay a blue streak for hours, cuss yore hide!"

"I'll do it, boys," said Figgerit. "Fetch Murph along."

It was his duty to see his friend home for the last time, and to tell Della what had happened.

This duty was an unhappy one to perform. Della was waiting out from the cabin, having seen them approaching. The little boy, who was six, and the girl, a couple of years younger, were playing in a broken-down buggy near the barn.

Figgerit thought Della looked prettier than ever, with her slimness and thick hair glinting in the lowering sun, rivaling strands of gold. Her large eyes fixed on Clint Parker as he got down. Her lips were set and her face drawn, because she knew, from the expression on Figgerit's face as he glanced at her, that her husband was dead.

CHAPTER II

Blind Trail

LATE that night Figgerit Parker dismounted in his own yard. He saw to Rube by the lantern hanging from the corral gate post. His small house was dark and his three hands, Mike, "Tiny" and "Frisco," were snoring in the bunkhouse.

Figgerit moved carefully and did nothing without first checking up on the immediate surroundings. He kept thinking of Della Murphy and how she had taken the terrible blow. Added to his long admiration for her was sincere wonder at her courage in the face of black disaster and loss of the man she had loved. She had cried, but had hidden her grief from the children, her first thought for them.

"He may be waitin' for me any place," mused Figgerit.

He was not unduly jumpy but he made sure that his unknown enemy was not sitting in the house, rifle across his knees, waiting for Figgerit to enter and strike a light. . . .

The following morning Parker took his cowhands to work on barbed wire strung along his eastern boundary. His cattle, branded 1 2, subsisted on the curling grasses of the range. The trail to Tule City wound that way. Across the fence was wheat and more wheat, with a public road running through the fields. The fence was a necessity, because it cost a rancher money when his cows broke into the grain. And it was not beyond the mental processes of the tenant farmers to clip a gap, let animals in, then demand damages in cash or beef.

That afternoon Figgerit left his men and rode southwest toward Murphy's, on his way to the funeral.

He watched intently as he cantered along and sought to avoid drawing too close to areas which might afford a drygulcher a hiding place. Yet Murphy's stood near the river and broken ground, so that as he neared Della's it was impossible to stay far off from wooded stretches and rocky breaks.

Rube, his favorite riding horse, was walking up a grade when Figgerit caught a sudden, scintillating flash from the direction of the Tule, screened by ragged lines of timber. He ripped at the rein, pulling Rube around in a violent whirl so that the gelding reared.

But, wary as he had been, Figgerit was too late. A heavy bullet thudded in, slashing his leg and mortally wounding Rube. The beautiful creature gave a single screech as Figgerit desperately kicked his pointed toes out of the tapped stirrups, just managing to clear the falling horse.

He landed hard on his shoulder, rolled over and lay flat, partially stunned. His right leg stung and he could feel blood flowing from the gash in the calf. Rube was dying, twitching a leg now and then, his head down.

Figgerit decided to play 'possum, hoping to draw out the marksman.

"I still got that S slash comin'," he thought grimly, biting his lip. The loss of Rube hurt more than the wound and there was fury in his soul.

Zang!

A metal horror ploughed the stony ground not a foot from his head, kicking up dirt and gravel, howling through the air like a banshee as it ricocheted on. This brought Figgerit to his feet with astounding alacrity. Right away he knew that his ruse had fizzled. The gunner was smart enough to understand that a bullet striking low enough to kill the horse from that angle would hardly hit the rider in a vital spot.

Parker forgot all about the flesh wound. It seemed unimportant and trivial as he rushed at a zigzag from the spot. Rube was dead. But twenty-five yards off a reddish rock thrust from the earth, offered a shield.

A third one that sounded like a giant buzzfly missed him by a yard as he dived behind the upthrust, surprised at the small space into which he could squeeze his long body.

After a few seconds he heard the fourth and last which could only have been sent from pique since Figgerit was entirely out of the killer's sight. It clipped the crest and sprayed him with stinging particles of rock.

He was breathing hard, the air rushing in and out of his heaving lungs, and soon he again grew aware of the leg injury.

"Funny what a man can do when he's put to it," he muttered.

Figgerit unloosened the acorn-leather runner which had prevented his flapping Stetson from flying off his head. He hung the hat on the muzzle of his Colt and gradually thrust it up so the crown just peeped over the ledge.

THIS drew no fire, but Figgerit did not venture out. After all, it was an old wheeze and anyone in his position was apt to try it. The drygulcher could be one jump ahead of him, waiting until he was certain of his target before trying again.

"Well, I was shore right," he mused.

Whoever had killed Dan Williams and Harwell Murphy had come for him. There was little comfort in this self-congratulation.

He wormed to the far side of the upthrust to peek toward the river brakes. Save for the hum of Tule Falls in the distance, the piping of birds in the thickets, everything was quiet. Rube's bulk lay there, stiffening.

"Yuh're goin' to pay for it all, mister," growled Figgerit. No man had ever been fonder of his horse that he had been of Rube.

He waited and waited.

"Can't lie here all day," he finally told himself.

He picked his next stop, a patch of brush twenty yards southeast of the rock. He had his wind back and had composed himself.

As he crouched, preparatory to springing up for the dash, a number of dark specks winged off downriver, a flock of birds disturbed by someone's progress through the woods. Figgerit was convinced it was his enemy, but just the same he put all he had into his run.

He drew no fire. The killer must have concluded it was too dangerous to hang around. Others might have heard the rifle's spanging voice and be coming to trap him.

It was suppertime when the dusty Figgerit limped into the M Bar yard. The funeral was over and neighbor women from Tule City were around. They had come to spend the day and assist Della. Not wishing to alarm them, Clint Parker said he had been thrown from his horse and had hurt his leg.

He ate with Bink and Willie and turned in early. Next morning the company had left and Figgerit sat on a corral fence, smoking in the warm sunshine. His leg was stiff, but he had seen to it and knew it would soon heal. Deep in his thoughts, wondering where to start on the trail of his unseen foe, he sighted a patent leather buggy, drawn by a raw-boned roan, coming in.

"That's Si Quillan's rig," he called to Bink.

"Yeah, yeah, it shore is," agreed Bink.

Si Quillan jumped down and dropped anchor by the front stoop. He was about fifty and wore "store" clothes and Congress boots. His thick brown mustache had wax in it and as he swept off his black hat, courteously greeting Della Murphy, you could see the set waves of his damp hair.

Quillan had an office in Tule City and was a notary, real estate dealer and what have you. Anyone who needed to have papers drawn or writing done applied to him.

Figgerit left his perch and strolled to the veranda where Della and Quillan were sitting.

"We're all mighty sorry, Mrs. Murphy," Quillan was saying. "I savvy it's soon to talk business, but I got a client interested in buyin' yore ranch and thought if yuh needed money pronto yuh wouldn't mind my speakin' of it."

Della nodded. "It's true, Mr. Quillan. I can't run this spread and I know it. It's been a lean season and there's little left. What's the offer?"

"Three thousand dollars."

"That's not much. Is it the best you can do?"

"I'm afeared so. I was told to say twenty-five hunderd first off but I've give yuh the highest figger."

Della's face fell. Then she said, "I suppose I'll have to take it. Wages and other expenses will just eat into what I get. I can't afford to hang on."

"Just a jiffy, Della." Figgerit threw a long leg over the railing and joined them. "I'll double that. Pay yuh six thousand for the M Bar."

She snapped at the offer. "I'll accept, Figgerit."

Quillan frowned and shrugged. After a while he drove off in his rig.

"How you aim to get that much money, Clint?" asked Della curiously. "You haven't done any better than we have."

"I can mortgage and borrow on notes at the bank, Della. I ain't goin' to see yuh cheated."

SHE had tasks and left him on the porch. For a time he thought it over, straightening it out in his mind. Somebody had been mighty quick with an offer for the M Bar. And none of the three Tule ranches had lately been notorious as paying propositions.

"Old Dan Williams' place was bought right off, too," he recalled.

Ten minutes later he had saddled up a borrowed M Bar black mustang. He set out and, by narrow trails through waving wheatfields, reached Tule City ahead of Si Quillan, who was on the road in the slower buggy.

When Quillan rolled in he parked his rig on the shady side of the Drovers Den, a barnlike structure which was the pulsing heart of the settlement. It had the longest bar, a fancy mirror, a dance floor, gaming tables and rooms to let.

Two lines of wooden buildings faced the dusty plaza, many of them built of green cottonwood which had shrunk alarmingly. There was a general store, a livery stable, the Mexican's *Tequila* Parlor and a few other commercial enterprises.

Staying out of Quillan's sight, Figgerit observed the agent as Quillan went into the Drovers Den and waved to a man seated at a rear table with a deck of cards spread out before him. This man joined Quillan at the bar and drinks were set up.

"Why, doggone, it's Weasel Watts," thought Parker. "He bought Williams' ranch!"

"Weasel" Watts had a wiry but strong frame and his bones stuck out where they could be seen. He had on fresh blue riding trousers, expensive halfboots, a clean shirt and bandanna, and a generous "Nebraska" hat hung by its strap from one hunched shoulder.

His hair was coarse and reddish-brown in color. His long-nosed, freckled face was sharp, giving him the aspect from which his nickname was derived. His movements were nervously abrupt as he turned his head this way and that, gesturing while he chatted with Si Quillan.

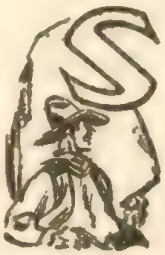
Figgerit was only mildly acquainted with Weasel Watts, a comparative newcomer to the Tule country.

"I'll shore aim to know the cuss better," he thought. "He has Dan's ranch, and he's after Murph's. That adds up."

Some folks looked on a weasel with contempt but, come to think about it, the critter was mighty active, actually a bloodthirsty killer dreaded by the smaller animals it preyed upon.

CHAPTER III

The Thread



SI QUILLAN, after reporting to Weasel Watts, left the Drovers Den and went to his office down the way.

"I shore got to figger it right," muttered Clint Parker.

He withdrew to the Mexican's across the plaza and began to chew over what he had found out. He felt safe enough in town even though he kept his back to the wall. Later Figgerit ate dinner and soon after dark fell, the street lamps were lighted and the bars and homes with them.

Weasel Watts did not show. "Reckon I'll try to smoke him out," decided Figgerit.

He crossed the wide street and entered the Drovers Den. Cowboys and wheat growers, and citizens of the town, keeping in their own small groups, filled the bar. Fried foods, liquor, damp sawdust and the distinctive odor of warm humanity fought for recognition in the room. Weasel Watts was not in sight.

Figgerit had a word with a barkeeper. Yes, Watts was living there.

"He's in now if yuh want him, Figgerit. Room Seven."

"Lucky Seven," thought Figgerit. Aloud he said, "I'll string along here, George."

After a while Weasel Watts came from a rear corridor and turned toward a gaming table. He wore an ordinary cartridge belt with a walnut-stocked Colt revolver in the pleated holster. Figgerit could watch him in the mirror behind the bar. When Watts sighted Figgerit he gave a

slight start and changed his direction, coming to the counter.

"Why howdy, Parker," Watts said warmly. "When did you come to town?"

"Just pulled in, Weasel."

"George, open up a fresh bottle and anchor it right here," ordered Watts. "Drinks are on me, hombre. Help yoreself." He was most hearty.

They hung over the bulge, Weasel pressing drink after drink on the young rancher. More and more men entered while a guitarist and a fiddler made music for the crowd. Figgerit had a strong head and could outlast most contestants in a liquor bout, but he began to feign intoxication, because that seemed to be Weasel's aim.

About ten o'clock he muttered, "Got to be movin', pard. See yuh tomorrer mebbe. Sleep at the livery stable."

Figgerit walked unsteadily out the open front door. Watts remained at the bar, looking after him.

Parker's stagger lasted until he had turned down the sidewalk out of Watts' range of vision. Then he quickened his pace and swung off into a dark, narrow aisle leading to the rear of the buildings along the main stem.

A few minutes later Weasel Watts hurried past, his step as springy as a hunting —weasel's, thought Figgerit. His hat was strapped low and his sharp face pointed forward, eyes gleaming.

When Watts had gone by, Figgerit hastily made the back alley. Room 7 was next to the last from the rear door of the Den. The door was unlocked and a small lamp was turned low on a table.

Along the wall stood a cot, a couple of plain chairs. A straw mat and a mirror over the commode were included in the usual furnishings of such a spot. A first-class saddle lay where it had been dumped in a corner, while in the opposite angle leaned a thick leather case containing one of the finest long-range heavy rifles that Clint Parker had ever seen. He examined it, finding it had been oiled and cared for as lovingly as a mother might care for her first-born babe. It had an adjustable sight for windage and distance.

Listening for steps which might herald Watts' return, Figgerit made a tour of the room. He missed little. Besides the rifle, just the sort of weapon the drygulcher would have used, he found a hunting knife with a staghorn handle in a sheath lying in the commode drawer.

Carefully he drew the blade which flashed in the dim light. It was as sharp as a razor. Figgerit's keen eyes studied every detail as he turned it over and over. Something attracted him, a tiny bit of color. He took the knife to the lamp and bent close to make certain.

BETWEEN the guard and the bottom of the staghorn handle was a slight crack where it had sprung a trifle. A mite of greenish thread was jammed in the crack.

Harwell Murphy had worn a shirt of that shade!

"When Watts made that slash, the guard caught in the cloth and ripped it," decided Figgerit. "Watts pulled out most of the stuff but that little hunk stuck."

He could tell the knife had recently been washed because there was a faint, fresh rust streak on the underside of the hilt where the oily rag used to wipe the steel had failed to make proper contact.

Figgerit drew in a deep breath. So far as he was concerned he had located Murphy's killer and probably the killer of Dan Williams. And that same drygulcher should be the man who had shot Rube and was seeking to punctuate Clint Parker's career.

He slid the knife into its sheath and as he was replacing it just as he had found it, noted a folded yellow paper in the back of the drawer.

"Mebbe curiosity killed a cat," he mused. "But so far it's been a help to me."

He took the sheet to the lamp to examine it. It was a telegram addressed to "Wm. Watts, Drovers Den, Tule City, Texas." The point of origin was Topeka, Kansas, and the contact puzzling yet intriguing to Figgerit. It read:

ARRIVE AMARILLO THE TENTH. STOPPING AT PALACE. ANTICIPATE SATISFACTORY REPORT. TREADWELL SLOCUM.

Having completed his investigation of Room 7, Figgerit checked the hall and slipped back to the front bar.

"I'll have to figger it," he murmured.

His first reaction was to pick a fight

with Watts and get it over with. Life would certainly be far safer for him with the ambitious Weasel lying horizontal in Tule City's quiet Boot Hill, instead of sneaking around in the bushes taking potshots at Figgerit and anyone else he happened to pick.

But the telegram seemed to point to somebody beyond Watts, an employer who expected a "report." His second thought was that he must delve deeper and seek the slayer's motive.

He was leaning over the bar and could see the open batwings and rear entrances in the mirror. The floor shook with cavorting celebrants dancing about, the Drovers den roaring with cheerful if crude exhilaration.

A fist fight started in a corner between a scowling wheat farmer and a red-faced cowboy, and the antagonistic factions began lining up. But bouncers quickly and impartially separated the opponents and tossed the two outside.

Weasel Watts came back to the saloon half an hour later and there was a cross, disappointed expression on his sharp face. When he spied Figgerit he turned redder, and he was breathing fast when he sidled up.

"Though yuh'd gone to turn in," he growled.

"The fresh air hit me and sobered me up," drawled Figgerit. "Have a snifter, Weasel."

Figgerit eyed his foe. The Weasel's big hands hung loosely at his side, one close to the pouched Colt. His middle finger twitched as though Watts itched to draw. But Parker wore a pistol and was not the kind to be faced down. Watts was measuring him, wondering if he could beat Figgerit to it in the pinch.

"Reckon I'll hit the hay," said the Weasel. "I got a pain in the neck."

Stiff-legged, Watts stalked toward the stairs and Room 7.

As soon as Weasel was out of sight in the back hall, Figgerit went out the front way and circled the building. He was pressed close to the shadowed wall when Watts came hurrying around.

"I always did like hide-and-seek," Parker drawled cheerfully.

Watts brought up short, and jumped six inches. Figgerit could hear his startled snort and there was a trace of fear in Weasel's voice when he spoke.

"We do keep bumpin' into each other, don't we? I—I dropped somethin' on the sidewalk and am going to hunt for it."

"Good luck to yuh. Huntin's fun."

Weasel Watts moved along. Figgerit went to the alley and faded off in the night.

HE WAS careful in picking a spot where he could sleep. There were stables behind the houses and he crept into a loft belonging to a town friend and hid himself in the hay.

"Today's the ninth," he thought, as he closed his eyes. "I've shore needled Weasel and he ought to report in Amarillo tomorrer."

He knew he had worried Watts that evening and the man should seek advice or help, perhaps both. . . .

Early as Figgerit rose, Weasel Watts beat him to it. When he entered the quiet Drovers Den, the Mexican youth cleaning up told him that Watts had left half an hour before.

"Which way, Pablo?"

"He ride off." Pablo waved north and in that direction lay Amarillo, a full day's run by horse.

Figgerit ate a leisurely breakfast. He had slept well and felt as bright as a daisy. The trail was interesting, now that he had the full scent, and his busy mind kept turning over various possibilities.

The M Bar mustang was rested and Figgerit saddled him. As the sun rose on his right hand, he rode out of Tule City, headed for Amarillo.

CHAPTER IV

Shindig

DARK had fallen when Clint Parker walked along the street of the humming Panhandle town. He had seen to the black mustang and eaten supper on the adjoining block.

The Palace Hotel, with its large, prominent sign, stood in the center of the city. It was much larger than the Drovers Den, and had a lobby, and a clerk in city clothes behind the circular desk. The bar was at one

side and a restaurant at the other, and there were plenty of private rooms for guests in the spacious wings, and on upper floors.

Figgerit could not locate Weasel Watts. His enemy was not in the bar or eating hall or the lobby. At last he ventured in and approached the haughty desk clerk who frowned at Parker's dusty range clothing, but was prudent enough to keep his observations to himself.

"Is Mr. Slocum in?" inquired Figgerit.

"Yes. At least I ain't seen him come down. Is he expectin' you?"

"I hope so."

"Another gent who looks like he might be a friend of yours went up half an hour ago. Turn left at the top of the stairs, Room Twenty-eight, third door to the right."

"*Gracias,*" Figgerit said, and asked chattily. "Yuh acquainted with Mr. Slocum?"

"Of course. He always stops here when he comes to Amarillo. The Palo Flour Company is an old patron of ours." The clerk snapped his eyebrows at the caller's ignorance.

"Does Mr. Slocum own the flour company?"

"No, no—he's general manager. Mr. Hackett is the owner."

"He's here too?"

"He arrived with Mr. Slocum this afternoon."

The clerk turned away and began pulling letters from the mail slots and shoving them back, showing how bored he was.

Figgerit crossed the lobby and went up the wide stairs, covered with plush carpet which deadened sounds. He found Room 28 without trouble and stood by the closed door. The partitions were thin and the transom was ajar, so he could hear men talking inside.

One voice was that of Weasel Watts, protesting.

"But I tell yuh, Slocum, this Parker cuss is leery! I'm shore of it from the way he acted. He's buyin' the M Bar from Murphy's widder. I pinked him and killed his hoss, but he shifted just as I squeezed trigger."

A sharp, authoritative voice broke in. "Just a jiffy, Watts! I told you I don't care to hear details. I'm after results. I don't give a hoot in the abyss how you get 'em. But if one man owns two ranches, you've heard of killin' two birds with one stone, haven't you? And why so shaky?"

Glasses tinkled. Weasel Watts' tone was injured as he picked up the talk.

"This hombre is tough. It was fine so long as I could operate on the q.t., but somethin' has put Parker on the prod."

"Fiddlesticks! One man stands in the way and you bleat like a sheep. I'm disappointed in you. Do you realize we only have a couple more days? The chief insisted on comin' here with me and I can't hold him off much longer. He's determined to get along with the construction, in time for the fall wheat crop. When we set up our blend it means we must deliver hundreds of thousands of barrels according to sample."

"All right, all right! But I aim to get help before goin' back to Tule. Pineleg Phelps, an old pard of mine, is in town and he's got a dozen gunslingers on tap. I'll hire Pineleg and his bunch to clean up. They'll cook Parker's goose for him."

"That's your problem. I have nothin' to do with your methods. The end is what interests me. You know how much we can make if we succeed. You bought the Williams ranch for twenty-five hundred and Hackett's payin' ten thousand for it."

"Yeah, but all Williams had was a niece back East who was glad to accept the offer wired her without havin' to come way out here. I'd have had the M Bar too if Parker hadn't horned in on my game."

"Dispose of Parker. Relax. We'll make it. Now look. Old Hackett will turn in early. I'm throwin' a little party over at Conchita's—hired a private room, and two young ladies will be there. Can you make it?"

"Can I drink when I'm thirsty?" Weasel Watts sounded cheerful for the first time. "I'll spruce up and meet yuh there at ten o'clock. And first thing in the mornin' I'll hunt up Pineleg. With him and his band I'll soon tear Parker to pieces."

A CHAIR scraped and Figgerit slid off. A few steps up the hall was a door marked "Service." He lifted the latch and stepped in among the brooms, brushes

and slopjars. He left the door slightly ajar so he could see the lamplighted corridor as Slocum's door opened.

Weasel Watts stepped out, turning to say good-by to his accomplice. Treadwell Slocum was a short but broad man, in blue trousers and slippers. His coat was off and blue sleeve garters circled his brawny biceps, holding up the cuffs of his white shirt. A clipped, bristling mustache dominated his squarish face and his black eyes had a snappy quality. He was fortyish and had pomaded his dark hair across the thinning spot on top.

"A high-class thief," thought Figgerit.

Weasel Watts went downstairs and the manager shut his door. Figgerit waited for the coast to clear, his mind busy. He had heard of "Pineleg" Phelps, a tough outlaw with a wooden leg who infested the Panhandle, hiding out at times in the caves of the Staked Plain whenever things grew too hot for him.

"I got to nip this in the bud," decided Figgerit. "Once Phelps comes into it I'll need an army."

If the bandits entered the conflict his duel with Weasel Watts would degenerate into a mass battle.

He glided silently through the hall. Making certain that Weasel Watts had left the Palace he crossed the lobby to the main bar and ordered a drink.

"How much do yuh savvy about wheat and flour?" he asked the bartender serving him.

"Not a thing. But see that feller in the white shirt and blue pants? That's Hen Drew—he's a miller here in town. He'll tell yuh. Say, Henny! Here's an hombre wants to learn about yore work."

Drew was elderly, quiet and polite, willing to chat over a drink with Figgerit, who asked several pertinent questions. The miller knew his trade and it was all interesting in view of Parker's problem.

"It's like this," explained Drew. "When the wheat's harvested it's delivered at the mill, where we grind it, durin' which process it's cleaned of dirt and chaff. We turn the grain into flour and bleach it. It's bagged and sold to wholesalers, dealers who ship it around to the different groceries in the land or export it if they got the orders. Specification? Well, a big flour company will sell a whole trainload or shipload of flour on the strength of a sample submitted to the buyer. The percentage of gluten is most important and there are other factors.

"Now, s'pose a company contracts to deliver fifty thousand barrels of flour, every one of which must come up to sample. And some don't measure up, the gluten content's different or the color's off. Then the buyer can refuse to accept the shipment and the company loses its shirt."

"I see." Figgerit nodded. "It's like if yuh sold a herd of cows on the basis of a few prime head yuh showed, and then delivered a passel of runts."

"Right. Yuh can sift animals by lookin' at 'em, and an expert can easy check flour by mixin' it with water and seein' how it shapes into dough and bakes into bread."

"All flour looks alike to me," said Figgerit. "But from what yuh say I savvy it can be as different as two longhorns. How can yuh get around havin' the stuff rejected, though?"

"Only by grindin' yore own wheat mixtures and makin' a blend of flour that yuh can duplicate because yuh have the grain ready to mill. Wheat differs a lot, even crops grown in the same vicinity, from season to season. Smart operators have their own grist mills and storage bins and take no chances of havin' big contracts busted on account of specifications. . . ."

IT WAS about eleven P.M. and the downtown section of Amarillo was humming with night life when Figgerit Clint Parker moved toward Conchita's place.

It was a squat brick building standing half a block off the main thoroughfare, just a short stroll from the larger Palace. Heavy plush curtains discreetly shaded the lighted windows, and at the front entrance stood a man in a Mexican serape and fancy steeple sombrero, wearing a six-shooter. He slouched against the wall, watching the door.

"On guard," decided Figgerit.

From within came the music of guitars and violins. Figgerit went past on the opposite side of the street, crossed over and walked through a passage which led him to the rear of the structures, avoiding embarrassing explanations to the sentry.

He soon located Treadwell Slocum and Weasel Watts in a private dining room. A round table stood in the center, covered by a snowy spread. Silver service gleamed in the lamplight while tempting dishes of food and several wine and whisky bottles were at hand. Around the board sat the two men and their giggling female companions. The door leading into the hall was bolted.

As Figgerit peeked through the gap made by the curtains as they rustled in the draught, he hardly recognized the Weasel. Watts wore a violently purple shirt and black pants. His reddish-brown hair had been slicked down with grease and shone like a mirror. He was laughing, and all his teeth and even his pink palate showed as he threw back his head. He was being merry with the dark-haired girl coyly smiling up at him.

Treadwell Slocum was turned toward the willowy blonde who was his dinner partner. He held a glass of bubbling light wine in one hand, toasting her as he drank.

The music from the interior of Conchita's was audible and changed from a haunting Spanish melody to a lively tune.

"This is the life, ain't it, Slocum?" cried Weasel Watts. "I could dance a jig!"

"Go ahead." Treadwell Slocum smiled.

Weasel Watts, intoxicated by the whole situation, jumped up and began doing a comic jig. He was a rangy fellow, and let his long arms and legs flap loosely as he went through the violent, jerky motions of the hoedown. It was amusing, and the girls shrilled with merriment.

Watt's own partner joined him after a minute. The floor shook with their weight and Slocum and the blonde began clapping their hands in time with the beat.

"Here goes," thought Figgerit.

He checked his Colt with his hand to make sure it was loaded and ready to draw. Then he thrust a long leg over the sill and was quickly inside the room.

LOOK FORWARD TO

APACHE PLUNDER

A Wayne Morgan Novel

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

NEXT ISSUE

CHAPTER V

Gun Point

TREADWELL SLOCUM happened to be sitting so that he was the first to see the intruder. And since the manager of the Palo Flour Company had never before set eyes on Figgerit, he misconstrued the sudden appearance of Parker.

"Get out of here, you!" he shouted angrily. "You're in the wrong place. This is private."

Figgerit had not drawn but he was ready to, his heavy revolver held prominently as he stood with spread feet, his back to the wall near the window by which he had entered.

"I hate to spoil anybody's fun," he drawled, "but this ain't a mistake, Slocum. Not on my part anyway."

The blonde screamed. "It's a holdup!" she quavered, clinging to Slocum's arm.

"I won't hurt yuh, girls," soothed Figgerit.

But the other woman caught her friend's hysteria and giving a cry of alarm, stopped dancing, and cowered in a chair.

Weasel Watts stopped jigging. As soon as he turned and saw Figgerit, he knew it was no holdup, not the sort the girls believed it was. His jaw dropped, his eyes popped, and his hand flicked to the spot where his holstered gun usually hung.

"It's on the wall peg behind yuh, Weasel," said Parker quietly. "Yuh took it off for the party."

Treadwell Slocum pushed away the blonde so impatiently she nearly fell off her seat.

"Who is this fellow, Watts?" he demanded sharply, frowning with rage.

"It's—it's Clint Parker," explained Watts in a weak voice. "Yuh savvy, the hombre I told yuh about."

He stood with his body tensed and his eyes riveted to Figgerit's right hand, which hung limp beside his pistol.

"Oh!" The wind left Slocum's sails, he froze in his chair, and Figgerit did not miss the manager's violent gulp which bulged out his necktie.

"Raise yore paws, Weasel," commanded Figgerit.

Such an operator as Watts could easily carry hidden weapons under his clothing. In fact, it was the custom of outlaws and those on the dodge to tote a spare firearm.

Watts put up his hands with such reluctance that Figgerit decided he must be right about the Weasel's concealed artillery. He was careful as he started around the table, intending to get behind Watts and frisk him.

Suddenly the blonde yelled and, jumping up, ran to the door, her brunette friend joining her. This brought the women between Figgerit and Watts and the Weasel reacted with terrific haste born of sheer desperation. Watts thrust a long hand inside the purple shirt, brought forth from a shoulder holster a black-barreled revolver and cocked it.

By this time the young ladies had unbolted the door and fled screaming into the corridor.

Weasel Watts was panicked and ready to kill. He had drygulched Harwell Murphy and Dan Williams, and tried for Figgerit, and held no scruples against such a deed. The expectation of victory flamed wickedly in Watt's reddened, narrowed eyes.

Figgerit had to make a lightning draw. The smooth-stocked gun jumped into his hand from the ready pouch, hammer spur back as the rising weapon cocked by its own weight. Parker raised his thumb, feeling the thud against the palm.

The Weasel's gun boomed. Yet Figgerit's had spoken a breath ahead so that Watts was sagging when he let fly. The Weasel's slug burned the side of Figgerit's left boot and plugged into the carpeted floor.

Watts stood erect for an instant, a surprised expression on his sharp face. His arms went down, and his underjaw flopped. A bluish-red mark showed between his glazing eyes where Figgerit had made his hit.

Then Weasel lost all volition and piled up on the floor.

"You've killed him!" gasped Treadwell Slocum.

The music had stopped on a beat and shouts, running feet sounded as the girls gave the alarm at Conchita's. Figgerit, his face grim, gun gripped in his hand, sprang to the open door to slam it and shoot the bolt.

HE WHIRLED and ducked as Slocum, seizing his chance, drew a small single-shot derringer from his inside pocket and fired in Figgerit's direction.

"Why, yuh fool!" snarled Figgerit, as the ball missed him by inches and slashed the wall.

He sprang at the manager and drove his left fist square into Slocum's mustached lip. The knuckles connected with the nose as well and Slocum bleated in pain as he staggered back against the wall and slumped to a sitting position.

"Don't—don't kill me!" he begged. A trickle of blood started from one nostril and the manager began to shake like disturbed jelly.

They were banging on the door.

"What's goin' on in there?" demanded an angry masculine voice.

"Get up, Slocum," snapped Figgerit, standing over the manager with drawn gun.

Treadwell Slocum was slow in obeying and Figgerit spurred him with a sharp boot toe. Slocum rose.

"What do you aim to do?" he quavered, thoroughly impressed by Parker and aware that Weasel Watts had been right about his fear of the rancher.

"Dry up, and climb out that window. Pronto. If yuh balk me I'll kill yuh dead!"

His prisoner believed every word and clumsily pushed through the opening, Figgerit quickly after him.

"March!" The Colt muzzle rammed into Slocum's back ribs, directing the captive the way Figgerit desired to go.

They circled the adjoining building, hastily leaving the vicinity of Conchita's. Around the block was a vacant lot and Figgerit paused there for a few minutes, listening to the hue and cry rising in the town. It was dark at the back of the lot.

"Yuh got one chance to go on cheatin' folks, Slocum," growled Figgerit as he held the fear-stricken man at gun point. "That is, after yuh've answered to the law for what yuh've done in sickin' Weasel Watts on us Tule ranchers. We're going' to pay a visit to Mr. Hackett, yore boss. Yuh'll lead me there, we'll go in the back way of the Palace. If yuh lie or try to run, yuh die. That's final. Yuh believe me?"

"I—I believe you!"

Minutes later, Figgerit stood inside the door of the hotel room while the startled John Hackett, president of the powerful Palo Flour Company, listened to the confession of his general manager.

Hackett had lighted a candle and pulled on his trousers when Figgerit had awakened him by rapping on the room door to which the scared Slocum had led him. The head of the Palo Flour Company was a rather frail, elderly gentleman with gray hair and a pair of intensely blue eyes which were steady and, thought Figgerit, eminently honest. From what he had overheard between Slocum and Watts, Hackett was no thief.

"Keep talkin', Slocum," said Figgerit coldly, as the manager paused.

"And so we figured on makin' thousands by havin' Watts buy up the Tule ranches cheap," continued Slocum in a sickly voice. "Then the company would purchase them at high prices." He kept eyeing Figgerit fearfully.

"Don't forget yuh savvied that Watts aimed to kill the three owners," put in Parker. "Yuh see, Mr. Hackett, Weasel Watts was a good shot even though bad all the way through. Watts drygulched two of my neighbors, left 'em with slashes on their bodies which made it look like revenge. He tried for me, and come mighty close. I got on Weasel's trail and through him, reached yore manager. Yuh believe all this, don't yuh?"

"Yes, yes." Hacket was horrified and highly indignant. "It's hard, but everything fits in. I did want to get the Tule ranches, especially yours, for there's good water power at your falls to run the big mill I planned to build there. I left it to Slocum to buy out you cowmen at a fair price. I intended to run a railroad siding through and manufacture flour blends right in the center of our new wheat-growing country. But it was to be done honestly. There's been friction between you cattlemen and our growers and I thought you'd be glad to move." Hackett shuddered, as he stared at the crest-fallen Slocum. "I had no idea what he was up to. I have many interests, and this was only one of them."

"Watts got hold of Dan Williams' ranch without any trouble. He paid twenty-five hundred for it and yore company bought it in for ten thousand. He near won the M Bar for a song, but I horned in and spoiled the game. Far as I go, I been thinkin' of movin' across the Pecos where it ain't so crowded. . . ."

TWO days later, as the afternoon sun slanted across the distant Staked Plain, reddening the Tule basin, Figgerit Clint Parker rode the dusty black mustang up to the M Bar.

Della Murphy came out of the house, a small child clinging to her. She looked sad, but she had weathered the terrible shock of having lost her husband, and she was the kind of woman who could pioneer in a new land. Figgerit dismounted and went to her. He had always loved Della, and he would never allow her to suffer for anything if he could help it.

They understood each other, too. Della had a few lines in her face from care and anxiety, but she was the only woman there was as far as Figgerit went. She brushed back a strand of golden hair as she looked up into his calm face.

"Where have you been, Clint?" she asked. "I was getting worried about you."

"I don't blame yuh, not after what happened, Della. Let's sit on the porch and I'll tell yuh about it."

Figgerit hoisted the fair-haired little girl to his shoulder and carried her along as she squealed in delight at the jogging and height. Della came at the tall rancher's side. Murphy's son was playing in the yard with a hound dog. Figgerit adored the children.

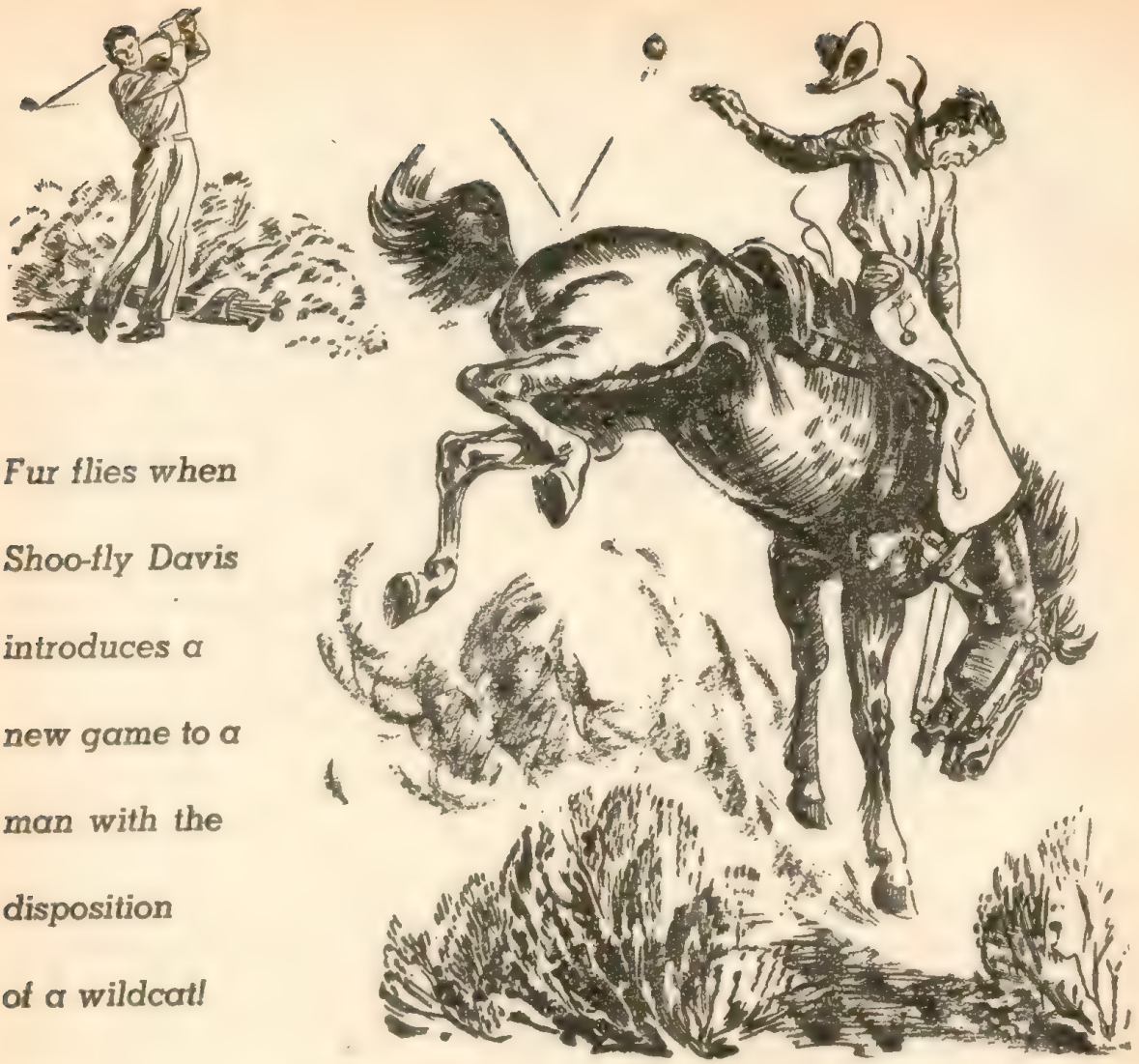
Della was silent, watching him as he spoke. He described the whole business.

"And that's it, Della. Yuh'll have what the flour company pays for the M Bar. I'm sellin', too, and shiftin' across the Pecos where I can buy a real spread with plenty elbow room."

Figgerit stopped and they looked at one another for a time. Then Della said quietly: "Yes, Clint, I'll go along."

Both knew that Harwell Murphy would have wanted Clint Parker to see to his family. That was the way Parker would have felt had he been in Murphy's place.

Della rose, touched his hand, and went inside to fix supper. Figgerit sat there, rolling a smoke and watching the ruby sky as the sun set. With the new family and all, he had plenty to figure on and there was real happiness in him.



Fur flies when Shoo-fly Davis introduces a new game to a man with the disposition of a wildcat!

The Fountain of Youth

WE'D BEEN over to Yucca Basin, I and Puggy Jimpson and Shoo-fly Davis, to take a look at Shoo-fly's goat ranch and see how them there goats was doin'. Whichever we found they was doin' all right, bein' big goats, tough as boot leather and meaner'n sin. Any coyote fixin' to get itself a meal off'n one of them goats would sure been in for an awful surprise, as them goats woulda run mister coyote plumb outa Cactus County, bein' that breed of goat.

Shoo-fly was plumb proud of them goats of his'n and had been braggin' plumb tiresome about 'em and I and Puggy lets him spout, whilst reservin' our opinion, as the poet feller says. Speakin' personal, me, Ike Ferris, I got no use for goats. For one thing, they're too tough for good eatin' meat; for another thing, they smell,

A Cactus County Story by L. P. HOLMES

and finally, there ain't a lick of beauty about a goat like they is a good saddle bronc or a nice fat cow critter.

I knows that Puggy feels like I do about goats, but we ain't sayin' as much to Shoo-fly, for Shoo-fly's feelin's get hurt plumb easy, and he's our pal, and us bein' friendly fellers don't want any pal of ours to feel bad. So we lets Shoo-fly spout and are plumb glad when we hits the edge of the big dry-lake flat above town, hopin' to find somethin' in Cactus City to take Shoo-fly's mind off'n those cussed goats.

We finds it. We finds it the minute we hit the flat. Plumb outa nowhere I see this thing come sailin' our way. It's a little white round thing and it's rammin' right straight at my head. I ducks, jest in time, too, and this thing hits Puggy's bronc right square and hard in the ribs. Kerplunk!

Up to then, Puggy's bronc had been shufflin' along, half asleep. Instanter that bronc comes awake and comes unhinged. Yes, sir! That bronc swallers its head and starts a plumb fancy job of unrollin' the kinks. For a second there I thought sure that Puggy was goin' to get tossed. He does lose a stirrup, but he manages to get it back and then does quite a job of fancy ridin', all the time cussin' plumb indignant at whatever it was that set his bronc off.

Shoo-fly, he grabs off his hat an' begins swattin' the air all around him, yellin', "Yaller-jacket nest—yaller-jacket nest!"

But it ain't no mess of stingin' yaller-jackets. It's jest a little round white ball, which, after bouncin' off'n Puggy's bronc, rolls along the ground and stops under a little stunt of sage brush.

Well, sir, by the time Puggy gits his bronc calmed down, here comes a feller walkin' along towards us. He's a young feller, plenty husky through the shoulders and plumb pleasant lookin', him with a big kid grin on his face. He's got a long leather sack hung on one shoulder, the sack bein' stuffed full of funny lookin' gimmicks that looked to me like chunks of whip handles with pieces of shiny iron and knobs of wood stuck on 'em.

"I'm very sorry, gentlemen," says this young feller. "I really didn't see you until after I had hit the ball. Then I yelled 'fore', but I guess you didn't hear me. I hope nobody is hurt.

NOBODY is, of course, except Puggy's feelin's, so Puggy says, kinda sulky. "If'n you want to do some target practicin' yuh oughta get a lil' further away from town, friend. Yuh oughta get back in the hills a piece, where yuh got somethin' to back-stop yore lead. I can't locate any fresh blood on this bronc of mine, so I reckon yuh didn't wound it too deep."

"Oh," says the young feller, "I'm not target practicing. I haven't any gun. I'm just keeping my golf game sharpened up. You know, gentlemen," he goes on, plumb enthusiastic, "I've been looking over the terrain and this flat is ideally suited for a golf course. A very sporty little nine hole course could be laid out here and I intend to promote the idea with the good citizens of Cactus City."

By this time Puggy is over his peevishness and lookin' plumb befuddled. He turns to me and says, "Ike, what's he talkin' about? I thought I hear him say somethin' about lookin' over a train. Now you know and I know there ain't no train within a hundred miles of Cactus City."

Before I can say anything this young feller chuckles. "Not train, friend—terrain. The lay of the land. By the way, I'd like to introduce myself. Robert Carr—Doctor Robert Carr. I am setting up my professional offices here in Cactus City and I intend to enter heartily into all the civic activities of the community."

I'm fightin' my head pretty near as bad as Puggy is, but I recollect enough to mumble, "Glad to know you, Doc. This here is Puggy Jimpson and yonder is Shoo-fly Davis. Me, I'm Ike Ferris."

Up to now Shoo-fly ain't said a word. He jest sits there in his saddle, looking Doc over. Now he ups and says, "Onc't I read about this here game of golf. Saw some pictures, too, of gents playin' it. They was togged out in the gol darnedest lookin' outfits of choke bore pants and such, I ever see. Howcome you ain't wearin' them funny kinda pants, Doc?"

Doc laughs. "You refer to knickers, of course. Well, knickers are sort of passé, now. By the way, did you happen to see where my ball went?"

"Yonder," says I, "under that sage bush."

"Oh, yes," says Doc. "Thank you. Lucky I'm not playing a match, for that is definitely an unplayable lie. I'd have

to take a penalty. As it is, just practicing, it doesn't mean anything."

Shoo-fly says, "Let's see you hit'r a lick, Doc."

Doc grins in that big kid way of his and says, "Certainly."

Well, gentlemen, I can hardly believe my eyes. Doc jabs a lil' piece of yaller wood in the ground, balances that ball on top of it, takes one of them gimmicks from that leather sack he's packin', winds up and takes the gol durnedest swipe at that ball you ever see. A kinda purty swipe, free and easy and smooth.

Anyhow, there's a swish and a crack and that ball takes off. Holy cow! How it takes off! It goes so fast and so far I can't hardly keep sight of it.

PUGGY JIMPSON, his eyes bug out an' his chin drops and he mumbles, "Son-of-a-gun! Ike, did you see that there ball git up an' git? No wonder my bronc an' me figgers somebody was shootin' at us with a rifle gun."

But Shoo-fly, his eyes is shinin' and me, knowin' the signs, can see that Shoo-fly is plumb interested. "Doggone, Doc," he says, "that shore was purty. I'd kinda admire to take a swipe at one of them things myself."

"Sure," grins Doc. "Have a try."

He reaches into that bag of his and pulls out another of them little white balls, balances it on another of them little yaller sticks that he pushes into the ground and hands Shoo-fly one of them gimmick clubs. "As a beginner," he says, "I suggest you try a spoon, first. It's an easier club to control than a driver."

Shoo-fly goes kinda red in the face and he begins to bristle. "Now looky here, Doc. I'm a friendly man and well meant. But I don't admire bein' poked fun at. For yore information, I quit eatin' with a spoon a long time ago."

Doc stares at him, wide eyed and innocent as a babe. "Why—er—I'm not poking fun, Mister Davis. In the nomenclature of golf, this club is known as a spoon."

"Oh!" growls Shoo-fly, "that's different. Well, let's have it an' gimme room to swing."

Shoo-fly spits on his hands, squares away and takes a wicked swipe at that ball. There's plenty of swish but there ain't no crack an' Shoo-fly durn near falls down.

"Where'd it go—where'd it go?" he yelps, starin' high an' far an' distant. "Anybody see it? Guess I musta knocked the cussed thing plumb outa the clover patch."

"Haw! Haw!" whoops Puggy. "Take another guess, Shoo-fly. Yuh never even hit it."

Shore enough, he hadn't. There's that lil' white ball still sittin' up on that wooden peg, bright an' sassy.

Now Shoo-fly's face does get red. He's a lil' guy, Shoo-fly is, all raw-hide an' whang leather, frowsy as a bear cub with hair an' whiskers. An' he's got fightin' spirit enough for five guys twice his size, plus a temper that shore ketches fire easy.

"Some low down bee-head moved that gol darn ball on me, jest as I swung at her," he growls.

"Oh, no," corrects Doc. "It was just that you didn't keep your head down, Mr. Davis. And that is the first cardinal rule of golf. Keep your head down and your eye on the ball."

" 'Zat so?" snaps Shoo-fly. "All right, we'll try her. An' you can drop that 'Mister' stuff. I answers best to plain Shoo-fly."

I can see that Shoo-fly is grittin' his teeth on this swipe. And doggone me for a sheep-herder if the little scratch cat don't sock that ball square and true and that ball took off in a white streak.

"Whoopee!" yells Shoo-fly, feelin' a lot better. "Look't her go will yuh!" He turns to Doc Carr, grinnin' like a fox eatin' fish worms. "Why, Doc—this is fun!"

"Of course it's fun," says Doc. "Golf is the greatest game in the world. It keeps the old young and the young half crazy. It's the original fountain of youth, golf is."

Shoo-fly picks up the reins of his bronc. "Come on, Doc. Let's you and me go round up them balls an' hit 'em another lick. Ike, I'll see you an' Puggy later."

So away the two of them go, Shoo-fly plumb draggin' his bronc along, he's that eager and anxious to corral his ball so he can give it another lick.

Puggy looks at me and says, "I dunno, Ike. Sometimes I ain't plumb shore that Shoo-fly is all right in the head. He hits

that lil' ball a lick an' knocks it half way outa the county. So now he goes chasin' after it jest so he can hit it another lick an' then chase it again. If that ain't goin' loco all of a sudden, I'd call it a plumb good imitation. Anyhow, he'll shore git eddicated, if'n he hangs around much with that Doc feller. Never heard so many fancy words in my life. Tee-rain, pass-ay, nomen—nomenclature, whatever in Tophet that means. Yes, sir—Shoo-fly is shore due to git hisself a case of brain strain, listenin' to Doc talk. Me, I'm still rememberin' there's a mite of corn likker in the jug at our cabin. Let's go git it."

THERE'S a little cabin at the edge of town where I and Puggy and Shoo-fly holes up when we ain't somewhere else. It's a plumb snug lil' cabin, standin' jest right so the breeze can blow through an' keep it cool. I an' Puggy is stretched out on our bunks, plumb restful an' comfortable when Shoo-fly finally shows up, about two hours after we left him out in the flat with Doc Carr.

Shoo-fly is limpin' some an' he lets out a long sigh of relief when he pulls off his boots an' sits there, wigglin' his toes. "Went an' got yoreself a mess of blisters, I bet," opines Puggy, "hittin' that silly ball an' chasin' it so you could hit it again. Ketch me blisterin' myself, playin' that high toned game of shinny-up."

Shoo-fly has a far away look in his eye. "Golf," he says, plumb lofty-like, "is more than a game. It is a test of physical endurance, of nerve control an' co-co-coordination. It is a test of character an' forth-forthright thinking."

"Criminy!" breathes Puggy. "Will yuh listen to him, Ike. He talks jest like Doc Carr. A dime gets you a dollar he chokes to death within five minutes."

Shoo-fly don't even hear Puggy. He jest sits there, wigglin' his toes an' lookin' far away. "Every community," says he, "should have a golf course as a-a-a—" Shoo-fly gags, whistles, spits and tries it again—"As a contribution toward the health an' general welfare of its citizens. Cactus City should have a golf course. Cactus City is goin' to have a golf course."

Shoo-fly let out a long sigh. "There, by gummies," he says, "I got her out an' I never forgot a word. Where's that jug? If you galoots left that jug dry I'll skin yore ears. Where's that jug?"

"Yonder," I says, plumb relieved to see Shoo-fly back to normal. "I an' Puggy left a couple of good snorts in it, figgerin' you'd need 'em after runnin' yoreself bow-legged, chasin' that golf ball."

"I need 'em, all right," says Shoo-fly, fastenin' on to the jug. "I'm plumb wore down. I'm tellin' you fellers, there's a heap more to that game of golf than meets the casual eye. For every ball I hit straight I hit a dozen crooked, plenty crooked. An' a couple, I got to admit, I never even hit at all. But I'm gonna learn how to hit 'em like Doc Carr hits 'em, if it takes me the rest of my life. I wasn't foolin' when I said Cactus City is gonna have a golf course. Doc's callin' a mass meetin' for tonight in Tug Stevens' Oasis bar to put the proposition up to the folks. Me, I'm shore gonna back him up."

Puggy looks worried. "This here golf course business—is there any work attached to buildin' one of them things, Shoo-fly?"

Shoo-fly takes a drag at the jug an' sits back, lickin' his lips. "Shore there is. What's a lil' work? If'n we can screen gravel to fill chuckholes in our street to keep careless folks from gittin' drowned in mud, an' if'n we can build a rodeo corral to give folks a show, why then I reckon we can build a golf course to keep our health an' well-being in line."

"Me," growls Puggy, "I'm healthy as a hound dawg pup, an' my state of well-bein' is better than perfect. But it won't be if I git attached to the misery end of a shovel or a hoe. I'm tellin' you, Shoo-fly Davis, if'n you keep on tryin' to promote some danged, bee-headed idee, that's got hard work attached to it, then you an' I is gonna have a fallin' out—plumb definite. Why you're gettin' as bad or worse'n fat Willie Weehaw—him with all his idees about civic pride an' the betterment of our fair city. An' every one of them idees allus ends up in back breakin' labor for Puggy Jimpson. I'm warnin' yuh, Shoo-fly. Yuh better go easy!"

"The mass meetin'," says Shoo-fly, plumb unconcerned at Puggy's misery talk, "will be at eight o'clock tonight—at the Oasis."

IT WAS, an' I an' Puggy attended, jest because there wasn't nothin' else of interest to do. There's a surprisin' number of folks present, mostly interested I figgers, in getting acquainted with this Doc Carr. It's plain that everybody likes him, which I can understand, him bein' such a nice lookin' young feller an' havin' such a fetchin' grin.

Anyhow, Doc makes a talk, an' he shore knows how to talk. I see Bosco Bates, our big tough sheriff is interested. Fat Willie Weehaw, who run the grocery store is all for Doc's idee an' Tug Stevens, figgerin' that exercise in the open air is bound to make folks thirstier than ever, puts in his two-bits worth of approval. Even Buck Kyle, the biggest cattleman in Cactus County, is there, just happenin' in. And he's for this golf course idee, too.

"Done a heap of readin' about this here golf game," I hears Buck say to Bosco Bates. "Allus did have a hankerin' to take me a swipe at one of them there lil' white pills an' see how far I could knock it. Jest the other day my girl Millie was after me, sayin' I'd done my share of hard ranch work, an' it was time I did a little playin' for a change. Mebbe she's right, Bosco—an' this here golf game is jest what I need. Tell yuh what, right here an' now I'm bettin' you ten dollars that when we git this golf course built, I can give you a whippin'."

"That's a bet," growls Bosco. "I'll pin yore ears back."

So right then and there, gentlemen, I knew dang well that Cactus City was gonna have a golf course, an' that I an' Puggy Jimpson was in for some hard work. I give's Puggy the eye an' we try an' sneak out, aimin' to leave the country until the hard work was all done. But as usual, we don't get far.

Bosco Bates calls us back an' growls, "Stick around, boys. We'll be needin' yore strong backs an' willin' hands, first thing tomorrow mornin'. Either that, or well, I ain't had nobody in my jail house for quite a spell and the fleas down there must be plumb ravenous. You aims to help us build our golf course, don't you, boys?"

I and Puggy gulps and allows that we do.

Well, gentlemen, to make a long story short, as the poet says, we builds a golf course. I'll say this for the rest of the Cactus City folks—this was one time when I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly didn't have to do all the work. Everybody give a hand, even fat Willie Weehaw. Buck Kyle comes in with Lee Hanford an' Skeet Mustang an' some more of his boys and they joined in, too. Doc Carr works twicet as hard as anybody, what with figgerin' out the lay of this here golf pasture and tellin' the rest what to do, him bein' the only one who knows a lick about what was needed.

When we git done we got nine of what Doc calls 'greens'. Only they ain't green. They're black as yore hat, being Wiggly Crick sand, screened fine an' mixed with some kinda black oil that Doc has hauled in from Silverville. This sand is drug down as smooth as smooth, an' there's a little tin can set in the middle of them there greens, the main idee bein', accordin' to Doc, to knock one of them there golf balls into that cup, an' the jigger who does that with the least number of tries, wins.

THERE'S a flock of other dinguses on this here golf course of ours. There's nine of what Doc calls 'tees', which is where yuh stand when you take yore first swipe at a ball, and there's nine 'fairways', which is the stretch of country between these here tees and the greens. Some of them fairways ain't so long, but there's others that'd be a week's walk for a dang fast steppin' sand lizard.

Doc has also sent outside for whole slathers of them lil' white balls an' flocks of these here clubs to hit 'em with. Before we git squared away for the grand openin' turnyment, seems like everybody's got hisself a sack of them clubs and balls 'ceptin' I an' Puggy, us bein' the only sane fellers in all of Cactus County, seems like. Even Shoo-fly Davis shows up at the cabin with a sack of them fixin's, though where he gits holt of the money to buy 'em, I dunno, him bein' most generally as bad broke as I an' Puggy, which is plenty bad.

"Don't you bee-heads touch my clubs," orates Shoo-fly, stackin' the sack of 'em in a corner. "I paid good money for them sticks, an' I don't want no dubs like you fellers out killin' snakes with 'em." And

after givin' I an' Puggy a earful of that kinda golf talk, off he goes, struttin' like a over-fed blue jay.

"Durn little squirt's gittin' too big for his britches," growls Puggy. "To hear him talk you'd think he was the jigger who invented this fool game of golf. All he does is hang around with Doc Carr an' Willie Weehaw an' Bosco Bates an' Jake Pickle an' talk golf talk, big an' important. Shucks! You'd think there was somethin' real difficult about hittin' one of them fool balls a lick. I bet I could hit one jest as good as Shoo-fly kin, mebbe better. When I was a kid I was the best shinny player in school."

"Me," I says, "I was purty good at shinny, myself. I'm like you, Puggy—I don't figger there's any mystery to this here golf."

Well, gents, that's the way it starts. While we talked, I an' Puggy was workin' on a jug of Tug Stevens' best snake juice, an' first thing you know we was feelin' so stout an' meller, we decides to prove how good we is. So we takes a couple of them clubs of Shoo-fly's an' a couple of nice, white, shiny new balls, goes out behind the cabin an' gets all set.

Puggy, bein' a good hearted feller, gives me first chance. So I puts down a ball, takes a squint at it an' cuts loose. I really takes me a swipe at that cussed ball. I swings so hard I leaves my feet plumb entire an' lands on the back of my neck. Funny thing about it, I never even touch the cussed ball.

I comes up feelin' kinda whangy, ready to really tear the cover off the ball next lick I try. But Puggy, he insists it's his turn, so I steps away to sorta get my breath an' ee-quilibrium back. Puggy squares away an'—*zowie!*—durned if'n he don't hit that ball smack in the center.

It takes off like a .30-30 bullet, fair screamin', it was goin' that fast, an' I an' Puggy watch it, bug-eyed. And what do we see, gents? Why we see that golf ball headin' straight for the back door of Jake Pickle's house an' right then who should be comin' outa that door, luggin' a basket full of laundry, but Missis Jake Pickle.

Now far be it from me to ever utter one slightin' word about any of the fair sex. But bein' a honest man I got to admit that Missis Jake is a mite on the hefty side, mebbe two mites. Likewise an' also, she's got a voice like a wolf bayin' the stars an' the disposition of a wildcat in a barrel of barbed wire. An' there she is an' there that golf ball is, sailin' right at her.

Puggy, he makes funny chokin' sounds in his throat, his eyes bugged out like they was about to fall plumb outa his head. I got to admit I was doin' my best to yell, too, but somehow I couldn't git a word out to save my soul.

Next thing we know that ball hits Missis Jake right where she's fattest.

Man alive! You never hear such a war-whoop as Missis Jake lets out. It fair raises my hair.

"Halp!" she squawls. "Halp! I been shot—I been shot! Halp!"

There ain't a bit of doubt of Missis Jake's wail of pain an' misfortune reachin' all over town. Simultaneous-like, I an' Puggy realizes what we gotta do. We do it. We put them golf clubs back in Shoo-fly's sack an' skitters outa there, plumb complete. Time we stop runnin' we're in the hayloft of High Pockets Magee's livery stable an', bein' men of good sense an' judgment, there we stays for the rest of that day an' all the next night.

WELL, SIR—the day of the grand openin' turneyment of Cactus City's new golf course dawns fair an' cool, as the poet feller says. I an' Puggy slips out there kinda quiet an' cautious-like, to watch the goin's on. There's a whole slather of folks on hand. Bosco Bates an' Buck Kyle has drawed the honor of bein' the first to start an' they're ready to go. Buck hits his ball the first swipe, but it takes Bosco two licks before he can hit his'n. Yet he knocks it twicet as far as Buck does his, so that, from the way I an' Puggy sees it, leaves 'em even. An' off they go, luggin' their little sacks, peggin' it after their ball, so they can take another cut at it.

Shoo-fly Davis an' fat Willie Weehaw is the next pair to git goin', an' I an' Puggy decides to foller this pair along, havin' a strong hunch we're goin' to see plenty fireworks.

Cat-face Collins an' Tin Ear Tinega is standin' lookin' on, an' they drops in with I an' Puggy to trail along behind Shoo-fly an' fat Willie.

"Me," says Cat-face Collins, "I can't see

a lick of sense to this here game of overgrowed shinny, an' it offends my sense of what's right an' what's wrong to see growed men indulgin' in it—but somethin' tells me things is gonna happen, an' I wanta be in on the hear an' the see."

"Likewise here," says Tin Ear Tinega. "What's that raisin' up ahead, a dust storm?"

Cat-face squints an' growls, "Naw! Ain't no dust storm. That's Buck Kyle an' Bosco Bates swingin' their fool heads off."

Well, gents, the hunch I an' Puggy an' Cat-Face an' Tin Ear has concernin' fireworks, shows signs of bein' a good one. For after sundry swipes an' hacks an' chops, Shoo-fly Davis an' Willie Weehaw each finally manage to herd one of them little white balls up on to that first green. Soon as Willie does, he picks up his ball, walks over an' drops it in the little can in the center.

"Hey!" yelps Shoo-fly. "What you think yuh're doin', Willie? You can't do that. I claims this hole on a penalty."

"What you squawkin' about?" comes back Willie. "I did jest what Doc Carr says for a feller to do, an' Doc knows all the rules. Doc says that when you get yore ball on the green you put it into the cup. Which I does."

"Doc never says no such thing," snorts Shoo-fly. "What he said was that when you git yore ball on the green yuh putt it into the cup."

"Exactly!" snaps Willie. "So I put mine in."

Shoo-fly begins to get sorta red around the ears, but he plumb amazes I an' Puggy by the way he keeps his voice down. "Now looky here, Willie Weehaw," he says, "in the past I an' you has had our differences over this'n that. But golf, bein' a sportin' game, I was plumb willin' to bury the hatchet an' call her an even start once more. But don't think because of that you can pull any fiddle-de-de business on me, because you can't. You play this game square or you an' me go to the mat, an' that's whatever. I won't stand no cheatin'—you hear me!"

"I ain't cheatin'," wheezes Willie. "I'm playin her plumb accordin' to the rules. Which says to put the ball in the cup, an' I put mine in."

There's a wild glare starts showin' in Shoo-fly's eyes. "Putt," he snarls, "not put. Putt—putt—PUTT!"

"Knew it," says Cat-face Collins to me, behind his hand. "Things is buildin' up. Shoo-fly sounds like he was gittin' plumb ready to explode. Mebbe we oughta step in, Ike, an' sorta head off trouble. I'm goin' to."

WHICH he does. Cat-face steps up an' says, "Shoo-fly, yuh're wrong. Yuh're arguin' plumb silly. You keep tellin' Willie he's got to put the ball in the cup. Well, he did. I saw him put it there with my own eyes. So did you. What you hollerin' about?"

"There," wheezes Willie, plumb virtuous-like. "Yuh see, Shoo-fly. I'm playin' plumb accordin' to the rules. I got witnesses."

Shoo-fly drops his clubs an' walks around in a little circle, like a hound dawg gettin' all set to lay down. Then he marches right up to Cat-face Collins an' grits, "Who invited you into this game, you slab-sided, wall-eyed jackass? What d'you know about golf an' how she should be played? I'm tellin' yuh, fat Willie has got to putt his ball in the cup. Understand? He's got to putt it in!"

Cat-face he kinda blinks an' looks bewildered. "Why, doggone yore eyes," he bellers, "he did put it in. I saw him an' you saw him an' so did Ike an' Puggy an' Tin Ear."

Shoo-fly begins makin' queer stranglin' sounds in his throat. "Putt, I said—not put. Ain'tcha got ears? Can'tcha understand the Queen's English when she is spoke proper an' accordin' to golf? I'm tellin' yuh, once and for all and final, Willie's gonna putt his ball into that cup or I'm gonna start usin' these clubs of mine for somethin' they wasn't ever intended for. I'm gonna beat the everlastin' liver an' lights outa some smart jaspers I know."

Cat-face Collins turns to me, throwin' up his hands. "I'm a slab-sided son-of-a-gun! I never see a man go plumb loco so sudden an' complete as Shoo-fly has. He tells Willie to do somethin' an' when Willie does it, Shoo-fly keeps yappin' that he ain't done it. Holy henhawks! Jest who is crazy around here, Ike?"

Now it's Puggy who tries to pour the oil on troubled waters, like the poet says. "Why spoil yore game, you fellers?"

Puggy chimes up. "Yuh're jest gettin' started. What's one little old hole when yuh got eight more to play? Why not jest pass this 'un up an' go after the rest. Mebbe next time Willie will put his ball in that lil' ol' tin can the way yuh want him to, Shoo-fly."

Now a reasonable man would have listened to Puggy, who was makin' sense, as I see it. But right now Shoo-fly ain't reasonable. He's got his neck bowed an' that's all there was to it.

"We plays her right or we don't play her at all," he snarls. "We don't leave this spot until Willie putts his ball into the cup like he's supposed to."

About now I gets an idee. "Why don't you show us how Willie is supposed to put his ball in the cup, Shoo-fly?" I suggests.

"A'right," he snaps. "I will. Gimme room."

With that, Shoo-fly takes a certain one of them gimmick clubs of his'n, goes over to his own ball, sorta squints down a line an' then gives his ball a little pat with that club he's got. The ball goes rollin' across that smooth black sand and—plunk!—it falls into that lil' tin can jest as slick as slick.

Shoo-fly turn around, his chest stuck out. "There!" says he. "That was a putt. An' that's what Willie's got to do with his ball."

"Well, fer gosh sakes, why didn't yuh say so in the first place," wheezes Willie. "Gimme my ball an' I'll do her."

Willie tries, only he don't do it as slick as Shoo-fly did. Willie has to give his ball four pats with a club before he gits it corraled in that there tin can. Willie's kinda talkin' to hisself before he's done.

"A'right," says Shoo-fly, "now we're finished with the first hole, all proper an' right. An' I win it. I was six gettin' on the green an' I'm down in one putt. That makes seven. You was on in seven, Willie, an' four putts makes eleven for you. So I wins. Now let's get goin' on Number Two."

Tin Ear Tinega rolls his cud of blackstrap, spits an' says, "This here golf game gits plumb intreecate, I'll tell a man. Don't make sense to me the way yuh count 'em. The last time Willie pats his ball he don't have to knock it any further than the length of a full stretched fishin' worm. Yet Shoo-fly counts it jest as much as when Willie really hits it a good lick. Speakin' personal, I'd say Willie oughta be charged only ten an' a half, or mebbe ten an' a quarter."

Shoo-fly grunted scornfully. "Whether yuh knocked her half a mile or only a inch, don't make no difference, Tin Ear. Every time yuh touch the ball she counts a full stroke. Them's the rules an' that's how she'll be played while I'm around."

WELL, SIR, Shoo-fly an' Willie gits started on the second hole. Right away Shoo-fly gits hisself into a peck of trouble. The first swipe he hits the ball it goes windin' an' curvin' off to the right an' ends up in a bunch of sage brush. For a change, Willie hits his ball right spang down the middle of things and the rest of us foller him while Shoo-fly goes over into the sage brush and starts choppin' an' hackin' away like he was fixin' to grub up all the sage brush in Cactus County.

Fat Willie, a gleam in his eye, ain't missin' a single swipe that Shoo-fly takes at that ball. I hears Willie countin'. "Seven—eight—nine—!"

When Willie says, "Nine"—why then Shoo-fly's ball comes tricklin' out into the open again with Shoo-fly chargin' after it, red murder in his eye. At that, Shoo-fly ain't raised half the dust and fuss that Bosco Bates and Buck Kyle is stirrin' up, mebbe a hundred yards ahead of us.

Shoo-fly, grittin' his teeth an' talkin' to hisself, grabs himself another club an' gives that lil' ol' ball a real belt this trip an' it heads out low an' whistlin', right for the center of that dust cloud which Bosco Bates an' Buck Kyle is kickin' up.

"How many does that make yuh to here, Shoo-fly?" asks Willie.

"Fore!" yells Shoo-fly, watchin' his ball. "Fore!"

"What?" screams Willie. "Four! Why you lyin' lil' polecate—you took nine jest gettin' free of that sage brush!"

"Fore!" yells Shoo-fly again.

Willie tears his hat off, throws it on the ground an' starts trompin' it. "Of all the forked tongued, preevaricatin', lyin' beeheads I ever tangled up with, yuh're the worst, Shoo-fly Davis," he bawls. "You'd cheat the pennies off'n the eyes of a dead man. But you can't cheat me. Nine swipes yuh took out in that sage brush.

an' nine she's gonna stand. Yuh can't pull none of this four business on me, not much you can't."

Shoo-fly glares at him. "Don't be stupid. I said fore, not four."

"Oh, Lordy!" mumbles Cat-face Collins. "Shoo-fly's off again on that locoed double talk. "What's he tryin' to lie about? He said four. I heard him. So did you, Ike."

Fat Willie, who had tromped his hat to rags, is on the verge of throwin' a fit. "You said four," he howls. "Yuh know yuh did."

"I did not," snarls Shoo-fly. "I yells fore. Yuh big, dumb pot-walloper, don't yuh know what fore means?"

"Shore I know what four means," shrieks Willie, almost foamin' at the mouth. "I also know what nine means, an' that's how many swipes yuh took gettin' outa the sage brush. Why don't yuh admit it like a man, instead of lyin' like a drunken tinhorn?"

THAT does it. Shoo-fly flings down his clubs an' starts for Willie. "Call me a liar an' a drunk tinhorn, will yuh? Tell me I says four when I said fore. Why, you big, over-growed tub of lard, right here an' now I'm teachin' you some golf ettykette—"

I makes a grab for Shoo-fly, but I misses. Next second him an' fat Willie is goin' round an' round. Now Willie, he'd make three of Shoo-fly, but he ain't near as fast on his feet, so she shapes up as a purty even go. Shoo-fly, he jumps up an'—*whango*—socks Willie right on the nose. Willie, he starts a roundhouse swipe from way back, an' when it lands it turns Shoo-fly plumb over in the air. But Shoo-fly, he's a tough 'un, so he bounches up an' tears back in, spittin' an' clawin'.

Me, Ike Ferris, I'm tryin' to figger out what to do about this fracas, when Puggy starts pullin' at my arm. "Goshamighty, Ike—do you see what I see? Looky yonder!"

I looks where Puggy is pointin'. An' what do I see? Well, I'll tell yuh, gents. I see that up where Bosco Bates an' Buck Kyle is havin' their lil' argument, the dust has started to lift an' thin out. I see somethin' else. I see Bosco Bates jest gettin' up off the ground, rubbin' his head. An' I see that big, tough sheriff of ours glare around an' then start back our way. Then I realize what's happened. That last ball Shoo-fly swats, has buffaloed Bosco Bates an' Bosco, he's plenty mad an' comin' back to see how about it.

"I wish," moans Puggy, "I wish we was a long way from here. Ol' Bosco, he's ready to rip an' tear."

Well, there ain't a thing we can do but jest stand there an' watch calamity, in the shape of Bosco Bates, come stalkin' down upon us.

By the time Bosco arrives, Shoo-fly an' fat Willie has shore messed each other up somethin' scandalous. They've tore the shirts plumb off'n each other. Willie's leakin' gore from his nose where Shoo-fly swats him an' Shoo-fly is spittin' more of the same where Willie has knocked out a coupla teeth. I'm tellin' yuh, gents, them two is shore workin' each other over.

Bosco Bates muscles right in, pushes 'em apart an' holds 'em that way. Bosco ain't got no hat on an' there's a lump on his head as big as a hen aig.

"Quiet down, you two!" roars Bosco. "Now then, which one of yuh socked me with that ball? Speak up—which one of yuh did it?"

Willie, he's gaspin' for air so he can't do nothin' but wheeze. I'll say this for Shoo-fly—he ain't afraid to own up. "I did," he pants, lispin' some through that busted tooth. "But I didn't mean to, Bosco. An' I yelled fore."

"Durned right he did," croaks Willie, gettin' a little air back. "He kept claimin' four when he knows dang well he took nine. The lyin' lil' hooty-corn! Lemme at him!"

Gentlemen, that was when I an' Puggy an' Cat-face Collins an' Tin Ear Tinega leaks outa there, plumb quiet an' cautious. We git plumb away from that there golf course. I an' Puggy invites Cat-face an' Tin Ear over to our cabin to gather in a lil' comfort from our jug.

"Me," says Tin Ear, smackin' his lips after a good long drag, "I admit there's a big plenty I don't know about this here game of golf. I allus thought she was a game for peaceful, civilized, law-abidin' folks. But from what I hear an' see today, I'd rather git into a rip-roarin' range war any old time than I would try my hand

(Concluded on page 91)

FREDERIC PHELPS

Holly upended his canteen over the fire, and flames sprang up

FIREWATER MEDICINE

EXPLICIT instructions came from the captain's lips:

"Reports have come in that bands of young Cheyennes and Sioux are prowling around along the line of the new Kansas Pacific Railroad. That may mean mischief—tracks torn up, telegraph poles torn down, holes made in the roadbed. You will leave at dawn on patrol. Take Corporal Williams and four of his squad, one pack mare and rations for ten days. Observe and report. Do not invite hos-

Trooper Holly Fights the Threat of Cheyenne Terror!

tilities, for one brush with those young Indian rascals may start a conflagration with which we are not prepared to cope at present. If attacked, defend yourselves, naturally, but try to use guile instead of violence in case of emergency. Understood?"

"Understood, sir!" Sergeant Matt Blourne replied.

"That is all."

Blourne saluted with a snap and stalked from the captain's office.

It was within an hour of sunset at Fort Wallace, and the rolling hills of Kansas were streaked with orange and scarlet light. Smoke poured from chimneys as the evening meal was being prepared. Men were laughing and talking in front of the post store. The guard was being changed and everything being made ready for the coming night.

SERGEANT BLOURNE, a tough old yellowleg who had fought through the War between the States and had remained in the army to fight under Sheridan in the Indian country, walked toward a troop barracks to find the man he sought. The manner of his stride told knowing men that he was on business.

He found Corporal Tom Williams washing his face and hands in preparation for the evening mess. Williams was tall and slender and above the average non-com in intelligence. He received Sergeant Blourne's orders with a gleam in his eyes.

"Don't look so happy, Tom," Blourne warned. "We're not goin' out to gain glory or death. This is a simple soldierin' job—observe and report, and stay out of trouble. There's no chance for promotion in this, and the post band won't be playin' to greet us when we get back. Now, the men—"

"Four of the squad, the captain said," Williams said reflectively. "I'd say men who can keep their heads, not recruits. Smith, Gordon, Lacey, Holly—"

"Holly!" Blourne echoed, and grinned.

"I know, Sarge. He's the clown of the regiment. Never was a yellowleg like him before. No more fitted for the army than I am for runnin' the new railroad. But he's a steadyin' cuss. What I mean . . . the men grin at his antics, and he's never hot-headed, and he shows a flash of sense at times—"

"Send for him," Blourne broke in.

Corporal Williams cupped hands to mouth and shouted to the guard at the door of the barracks:

"Pass word for Trooper Joe Holly! Tell him to report to me here on the double!"

In two minutes, Joe Holly was standing before the sergeant and corporal.

Blourne looked him over. Joe Holly was a physical misfit. He was six feet three in his socks, thin as a rail, with stooped shoulders and a scrawny neck up and down which an enormous Adam's apple bobbed when he gulped. His eyes were small and squinty, his face dotted generously with freckles, and he had an unkempt mass of dirty-looking reddish hair.

"We're pickin' men for a detail, Holly, and the corporal has suggested you for one," Blourne said. "A pleasant little outing, a chance to get away from barracks for a few days, but I don't know as I want you."

"Aw shucks! Why not, Sarge?" Joe Holly's voice was squeaky, sounding as if his vocal cords needed oiling.

"You never obey rules and regulations."

"Them things! There's so many of 'em, Sarge, that I keep forgettin'. I do as I'm told—"

"You obey a direct order at the moment it's given," Blourne admitted. "But if you make a mistake and are corrected, you forget and make the same mistake again. Sometimes, Holly, I think you forget on purpose."

"Aw, let me go along, Sarge," Holly begged. "I'll be forgettin' how to fork a horse. Anyhow, it's your duty to keep me out of temptation. Here in the post, with nothin' to do but answer stable call twice a day, a man gets careless. He wanders around wonderin' what he can do to occupy his time. He might play cards too much, or get to drinkin'—"

Blourne stopped him with an uplifted hand. "You swig raw post barrel whisky like a thirsty horse does water. Remember the time I took you out with a detachment, and water got scarce? We needed some for a hurt man. And what did you have in your canteen? Not water, but whisky."

Holly hung his head and scratched the ground with the toe of his right boot.

"Aw, shucks! The whisky braced him up more'n water would have done."

"This detail is goin' where every man has to be alert, Holly. If the captain's orders aren't obeyed to the letter, he'll skin me alive, and in turn I'll skin alive any man who gets me skinned by his disregard of regulations."

"I'll do what I'm told."

The sergeant gave in. "All right. Put Holly on the list, Corporal. At dawn tomorrow. No hint to the other men, except that we're goin' on the usual patrol. Holly!"

"Yes, Sarge?"

"You're on your good behavior. You play any pranks this time and maybe get the squad in trouble, and so help me, you'll be cleanin' stables and haulin' manure for the next month! And remember your canteen is for water, not whisky!"

"Yes, Sarge."

"I'll inspect the detachment before we leave, and you be sure your carbine's clean for once. Pack your saddlebags correctly, too. Whatever gave you the idea you could be a trooper is beyond me."

Sergeant Matt Blourne nodded to Williams and hurried away to his own quarters. . . .

THEY reached the new railroad and for three days patrolled along the raw roadbed. Trains rattled past them at times, the wide stacks of the locomotives belching clouds of thick, black wood smoke. It was summer, and though it was hot during the days and most of the nights, there was no rain. The prairie wind burned them and hurled clouds of dust at them, blowing it into their eyes and hair, inside the fronts of their sweat-stained shirts, and into their food.

Occasionally they saw a few Indians in the far distance against the skyline, but the redskins did not look or act like marauding young hostiles.

The squad had got into broken country, a section of deep ravines lined with brush and clumps of trees, and where small winding creeks furnished fresh water for horses and men.

The detachment had enjoyed an easy time since leaving the post. They jogged along, generally taking it leisurely, looking for Indian sign. They made camp early and broke it late. Whenever possible, they camped beside a creek. Joe Holly, an inveterate fisherman, kept them supplied with fresh fish—catfish, perch, sunfish, sometimes bass.

Around the campfire at nights, before the men rolled in their blankets, they enjoyed Holly's half-mad antics. He imitated the commanding general, their own captain, an old trader who loafed around Fort Wallace. He sang lusty songs in his peculiar, squeaky voice, beating time on a canteen with a stick.

"That's whisky singin'," Sergeant Blourne told him one evening. "I had Williams serve all of you a drink when we made camp, but no one drink would liven you up like that, Holly."

"Just natural for me to be lively," Holly said.

"You got whisky in your canteen?" Blourne demanded.

Holly offered his canteen, unscrewing the top. Blourne found the canteen filled with water.

"Seems wrong, though," Holly declared. "Plenty of water in this country 'thout us havin' to tote it. Creek every mile or so. Them regulations say we've got to pack a canteen on a trip like this, and since we don't need to tote water seems like there should be somethin' else in the canteen. Be sensible. A man never knows when he might need whisky. Lots of snakes hereabouts."

"You remember what I told you," Blourne warned. "You'll get yourself on stable detail for a month if you get careless about orders. We're makin' for Mountainville. Be there in another two days. I'll give you a chance to collect a few drinks there, but you'd better not fill your canteen with firewater."

The next morning they broke camp and went on as leisurely as before. About noon, they saw thick smoke lifting beyond the hills ahead.

"Fire," Corporal Tom Williams said.

"And not a brush fire, either," Blourne replied. "I've studied the map of the railroad well. There's a wide creek bed about where that smoke rises, and a long wooden trestle the railroad built across it."

"Could be an engine spark set the fire," Williams observed. "Could be Injuns, too."

Sergeant Blourne called for speed. They had seen no Indian sign, but that did not mean Indians were not in the vicinity. Watching the distant smoke, they rode at speed over level hard ground where the grass was not high. The railroad was a short distance away on their right. And a locomotive whistle sounded and a work train came rattling along, going toward the smoke.

"They'll take care of it," Blourne said, stopping his men and indicating the crew on the train. "Holly and Smith—go back and pick up the pack mare and get her here."

They got the pack mare and drove her into camp. The men ate cold food from their saddlebags; then Blourne urged them on.

When they came to the wooden trestle, they found it two-thirds in ruins. Two telegraph poles had been uprooted and the wires broken. Men from the work train were preparing to make repairs.

"Tracks of unshod ponies all around," the superintendent of the work train told Blourne. "Injuns. Young Cougar, prob'ly. You've heard of him, Blourne. Crazy young Cheyenne, son of Chief Wise Eagle. Young Cougar calls himself a chief already, though Wise Eagle is still alive. He's gatherin' the young braves around him and may start bad trouble."

Blourne urged his men on. The Indian trail was not hard to follow. At least thirty of them, Blourne decided, and all crazy young braves eager to show their might as warriors, with Young Cougar playing at being chief.

A delicate situation might arise if the detachment met the Cheyennes. It would be a time for diplomacy and guile, and at the same time the detachment would have to be prepared for serious trouble. Do not invite hostilities, but if attacked, defend yourselves, the captain had said.

WHEN dusk approached, they stopped at a creek and made camp. Men and horses were tired. The horses were staked out instead of being hobbled and allowed to roam; reckless young Cheyennes were natural horse thieves.

The evening meal was cooked and eaten, and the camp fire was built up well because a cold wind had come out of the north and was sweeping down along the creek. Sergeant Blourne and his men relaxed, talked of army affairs, considered the Indians.

"Sheridan will have 'em on their reservations before next winter," Corporal Williams declared. "Only scattered bunches to contend with now."

"The young men don't like the idea of life on a reservation," Blourne told them. "They want to be warriors. The old chiefs know what's best. But the wild young uns—they'll have to be watched."

Joe Holly had strolled over to look after his horse, and had stopped where the gear had been piled to get one of his blankets. Now he returned to the fire and sat in a shadowy spot not far away. For a time he played softly on a mouth organ.

"Beats all time how a man's hampered," he declared. "If a man could play a mouth organ and sing at the same time, it'd be somethin'."

"Don't start your caterwaulin' tonight," Blourne warned. "It'd draw every Injun within ten miles."

Holly tossed more wood on the fire, took a swig from his canteen and sat in the shadows again to listen to Corporal Tom Williams tell stories. Some of the troopers were yawning and thinking of their blankets, wondering which man Blourne would put on first guard. The stars were out, but there was no moon.

A horse snorted, and the men sat up straight, listening and peering into the semidarkness.

"Coyote, maybe," Williams said.

The brush rustled not far away. An odor swept through the little camp on the night wind.

"Injuns," Blourne corrected. "Remember—don't start trouble. Have your guns ready, though."

The men reached for their carbines, to put them down on the ground at their sides where they could be reached easily. The brush rustled again. A young Indian strode into the circle of firelight with both of his hands held high in a sign of peace.

The men were silent. Sergeant Blourne got to his feet and stood beside the fire.

"Me Cheyenne," the young Indian said. "Others in brush. Chief wants to talk."

"I am always ready to talk to my

friends, the Cheyennes," Blourne replied.

More rustling in the brush. Several young Indians appeared, some of whom had their faces partially painted. One strutted up to the fire with an air of arrogance. He wore a chief's head dress.

"I am Chief Young Cougar!" he announced, in the brand of English he had picked up from passing traders.

"You are the son of Wise Eagle?" Blourne asked.

"I am his son."

"It grieves me to hear that Wise Eagle has gone to join his fathers. He was a good and great chief, a mighty hunter—"

"Wise Eagle not die," Young Cougar interrupted.

"Then how can you call yourself chief and wear a headdress?" Blourne asked. "I do not understand this."

"My father and the old men of our tribe sit before the fire and think of the past," Young Cougar declaimed. "The cold is in their bones. But young Cheyennes, young warriors, have fire in their bodies. We do not like to sit around the fire and dream."

"You would rather ride your ponies and hunt, I know," Blourne replied.

"We are Cheyennes! We do not like to be driven from our hunting grounds by white men—"

"It is useless for us to talk of that," Blourne broke in. "Your great chiefs have been in council with the chief of the white men and have decided on certain things. We are only little men who must do as they say."

"All young Cheyennes look to Young Cougar to lead them now," the Indian declared.

"The bridge over which the iron horse travels has been burned," Blourne hinted.

"We built the fire," Young Cougar confessed. "The iron horse frightened our ponies, and two ran away. So we built a fire under the track that runs on logs."

"That was wrong. Young Cougar and his braves will be caught and punished. Word has gone out that the track of the iron horse must not be harmed."

"Word from the white man," Young Cougar said, his eyes ablaze. "Cheyennes do not give heed to their word. Why should we do as the white man says? If many soldiers are sent against us, we will fight, for we are ready."

"Young Cougar, the white man does not seek war with you."

"He is a coward who dares not start the war," Young Cougar declared. "But if the young Cheyennes start it, the white man will have to fight. Then he will be driven from the land. If the Cheyennes start it, their friends, the Sioux, will join with them. And the Utes in the mountains, and the Arapahoes and Shawnees. Over the plains and in the mountains the red man will fight the white man and destroy the tracks of the iron horse—"

"Do you mean that Young Cougar would start this war if he could?" Blourne asked. The sergeant did not look around at his men, but he heard slight movements and knew his handful of troopers were reaching for weapons.

"Young Cougar could—and will," the reply came. "Many of my young braves are around you now in the brush. They have their guns and arrows ready. We have made medicine—"

"You mean you would kill me and these men of mine?" Blourne asked him. "Would it be a great honor for Young Cougar and his braves to kill such a few men as we are?"

"It would start the war between us," Young Cougar replied. "Soldiers would come to avenge you, and we would give them battle. We could gain much honor in battles that would follow."

SERGEANT Matt Blourne was doing some rapid thinking. He knew he and his men were in a tight spot.

If the detachment was surrounded by Indians in the brush and darkness, one volley would end Blourne and his men. At Young Cougar's signal that volley might come even before Blourne or one of his men could kill the young chieftain. Blourne had with him only his corporal and four men.

"We did not expect war with you," Blourne told Young Cougar. "We have not made medicine. Will Young Cougar be fair enough to let us make medicine tonight and start his war tomorrow?"

"We strike now," Young Cougar declared. "Then we ride to where men have built sod houses and started what they call farms. We will kill them and run off their stock. The medicine of the white man is weak, so why spend time

making medicine? If you could do it quickly—"

A squeaky voice came from the shadows, and Joe Holly suddenly appeared before Young Cougar at the fire.

"I am medicine man," Holly squeaked. "My medicine is strong. The Cheyennes would run in fright if they saw it."

Young Cougar's eyes glittered. "We are not afraid of the white man's medicine. It has no strength. Let us see some of this great strong medicine you have."

Blourne was trying to whisper to Holly to get away. As usual, the regiment clown was doing the wrong thing, saying the wrong thing, putting the detachment in deadly peril. Blourne had hoped to talk Young Cougar out of massacre. Now, Holly had issued a challenge, and Young Cougar had accepted it.

"So you want to see some medicine?" Holly asked. "I'll show you some, you flea-bitten red scum! You Cheyenne, callin' yourself Young Cougar! A cougar is the lion of the mountains, and a Cheyenne is a prairie dog."

Young Cougar growled, and sounds of anger came from the dark brush around the camp.

"What's this?" Holly cried. "A fire, huh? You Cheyennes know what fire is, huh?" He stopped and picked up a canteen from the ground. "And what is this? What's in it?"

"Water to drink," Young Cougar said.

"Right! When water is poured on fire, the fire is made a dead thing, huh? Like this!"

Holly got the top off the canteen, stepped to the campfire, and poured the water upon the burning sticks at the edge. There came a hiss, the sticks blackened, the glow of the fire was killed.

"That is what water does to fire, huh?" Holly squeaked at Young Cougar. "If you Cheyennes start war, you'll be like them sticks—dead. This is the medicine—that you are the burnin' sticks and you'll be dead and done when the white man pours water on you. And then the white man will go through the plains like a ragin' flame and kill all Indians."

Young Cougar gave a snort of derision. "That is not medicine," he replied. "Any man can drown fire with water."

"But can Cheyennes pour water on fire and make that fire rage instead of bein' drowned?" Holly demanded. "Watch my strong medicine!"

He took his own canteen off his belt and uncapped it. He held it toward the sky and began a squeaking tirade:

"Oh, great General Sheridan! . . . Oh, great spirit of greatest warrior in the past! . . . Show these here benighted heathens what great power I have!"

He stepped up to the other side of the fire. "You watch, Young Cougar!"

He upended the canteen and liquid spewed forth. The tiny flames sprang into the air. The liquid ran among the sticks and the flames turned blue and ran along the trickles. The fire began cracking and burning briskly.

Young Cougar stepped backward. Grunts of fear came from the brush.

"The white man's medicine!" Holly squeaked. "Water makes wood burn! What will this medicine do if it's turned toward the Cheyennes? If I throw some on you now, Young Cougar—"

Holly took a step forward and raised the canteen. But Young Cougar turned and ran, shouting to his braves. As the troopers grabbed their carbines and sprang to their feet, they heard a wild rushing in the brush, and then the drum of unshod ponies' hoofs as the Indians racked away. The moon peeped up from behind a hill to show fleeing shadows. . . .

THE night passed without further trouble, and the dawn came. Breakfast was cooked and eaten. Sergeant Matt Blourne gave the order to saddle up. When they were ready to ride on to the village of Mountainville, from where they were to start the return trip, Blourne spoke to Holly:

"So you had your canteen filled with whisky again," he accused. "Water in it when we started."

"Had another canteen in my saddlebag," Holly confessed.

"Well, you got us out of a mess, Holly. I'll tell the captain about it and you'll get credit. But you'll get thirty days stable duty when we're back at the post, just the same. I warned you, and you disobeyed orders. . . . Forward! Ho!"

The detachment moved. Holly sagged in his saddle, his appearance anything but soldierlike. "Anyhow, I had me some fun," he muttered.

THE BORDER SCOURGE

The dramatic true story of Juan Cortina, who struck terror in the hearts of dwellers on the Rio Grande!

Revolver in hand, Cortina rode slowly out of town

By

HARRY VAN DEMARK

OVERRUN with wild, thorny scrubs and well-hidden in a clump of mesquite trees on the Guerra ranch, thirty-five miles north of Roma, in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, two old cannons were unearthed a few years ago. On each of them was a rusty plate upon which was inscribed the name, "Juan Nepomucena Cortina."

They were grim mementoes of the bandit army which Cortina led in many forays upon towns and ranches along the lower Rio Grande, both before and after the Civil War.

Cortina's wild band of nondescript Mexicans and Indians, five hundred strong, stormed and captured Brownsville and its sister city, Matamoros, across the river in Mexico. Their equipment included several cannons, and it is supposed that the two pieces so belatedly discovered were abandoned in a retreat from attacking Texas Rangers.

For nearly two decades Cortina was the terror of the Southwestern frontier. He was born in Mexico of Spanish parents, near the Sierra Madre range, about 1820. He was an active and powerful man and an accomplished equestrian. The expression of his face was sinister.

sensual, cruel. He was illiterate, his only writing a scrawl which passed for his signature on death warrants, *pronunciamentos,* and directions for plunder.

Daring and Desperate

At the commencement of hostilities between the United States and Mexico, following the crossing of the Nueces River, claimed by Mexico as the western boundary of Texas, by the forces under the command of General Zachary Taylor, in March, 1846, Cortina entered the Mexican government service as a guerilla and spy.

He was in command of the party which killed Colonel Freeman Clark of the United States Army, and, later, Lieutenant J. C. Porter and three men. As a partisan and spy during the days of the Mexican War he made a reputation for daring and desperate courage.

Cortina lived on a ranch situated on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande, about eight miles above Brownsville. His younger days were spent in driving stolen stock into Texas as far east as Goliad, and in gambling and cock-fighting.

One September day in 1859 Cortina was standing in the door of a gambling house in Brownsville when he saw the city marshal, a man named Speers, shoot a Mexican on the plaza. Cortina immediately advanced to Speers, spoke to him, then deliberately shot him in the face. Mounting his horse, revolver in hand, he slowly rode out of town, bidding defiance to all Americans. For some reason he was not pursued.

Jail Break—and Death

But that was not the end of the episode. Cortina's ire had been aroused at the shooting of a fellow countryman, and he virtually declared war on Americans. Daybreak the following morning found him in front of the Brownsville jail at the head of thirty well-armed and mounted men.

The keys of the *calaboza* were demanded of the jailer, Amos Johnson, who stepped forth holding the key upon one of the fingers of his left hand.

"If you want it, come and take it!" he said.

A Mexican stepped forward to secure the key. Johnson shot him dead in his tracks and wounded two others who came to his assistance. But he, in turn, was riddled and hacked to death.

Cortina then threw open the doors of the jail, murdering a blacksmith because he had riveted fetters upon Mexican prisoners, slew several other persons, and plundered stores. Then he rode out of town, unmolested and defiant.

The garrison of the fort were off on a mission, and there were no Texas Rangers in the vicinity to take up the pursuit.

Pronunciamento

Cortina's entry into banditry in 1859 created intense excitement throughout Texas. Governor G. B. Runnels immediately appointed Colonel John S. Ford, veteran Indian fighter, to take command of a force of Rangers and volunteers and proceed to the scene.

The United States Government was called upon for assistance and directed Colonel Robert E. Lee, afterward the Civil War leader, if necessary, to cross the Rio Grande into Mexico.

In the meantime Cortina had made his headquarters at his mother's ranch, from where he issued a *pronunciamento* calling upon all Mexicans to rally to his support. He declared his intention of wresting from the Texans all the land west of the Nueces River.

He succeeded in raising some five hundred men and secured several small pieces of artillery. Several fights took place in the neighborhood of Matamoros, and finally, in December, 1859, in an engagement near Rio Grande City between the United States troops and Texas volunteers under Colonel Ford, the force of Cortina was defeated and dispersed, although the leader escaped capture.

Cortina remained on his ranch until the invasion of Mexico by the combined French and Austrian forces under Marshal Bazaine, and the elevation of Archduke Maximilian to the imperial throne of Mexico.

Cortina then recruited a number of men and, declaring against the Imperialists, took possession of Matamoros. Shortly afterward Matamoros was captured by the forces of Maximilian under General

Mexia, and a captain of mutineers was executed.

Rustling in the Lordly Manner

Cortina again made his escape and continued to wage war upon the Imperialists until the capture and execution of Emperor Maximilian and Generals Miramon and Mexia at Queratarо, June 19, 1867. Cortina then returned to the scene of his former exploits near Matamoros and rose to the rank of brigadier-general. His conduct on both sides of the Border, and the many incursions made by his men into Texas for purposes of robbery and murder, resulted in strained relations between the two countries and nearly culminated in war. In 1875 the United States military forces along the Border were augumented and the light-draft gunboat *Rio Bravo* was dispatched from New Orleans, via Galveston, to the Rio Grande for the purpose of patrolling that stream.

To handle his enormous traffic in stolen herds, Cortina seized twenty ranches in Tamaulipas, most of them facing the Rio Grande. Here he pastured and held this stock and became the wealthiest man in his section.

In the early Seventies Congressional investigators charged that there were around three thousand raiders organized and licensed by Cortina. This enormous number had not diminished much when Texas finally got around to attempting to handle the situation.

Ranger Captain Lee H. McNelly, hard-boiled member of the famous Texas law enforcement forces, was ordered by the governor to do the job. McNelly, tough, experienced in many Border battles with both Indians and Mexicans, as well as bad men of the white race, welcomed this assignment.

A Decisive Battle

There was a decisive battle at Pital Hill, in which McNelly accounted for every bandit who chose to fight. This setback to Cortina's plans slowed up bandit depredations, but only for a brief period. Within a month the raiders were crossing back into Texas in increasing numbers and with even more boldness than formerly.

It became too big a job for the Rangers and the governor appealed to the United States Government for aid.

Cortina was elected Governor of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas in the fall of 1875 and the Border continued in such a state of unrest and excitement that grave fears of a war with Mexico were again entertained. The raiding parties were actively pursued, but quiet was not restored until 1876, when Cortina was arrested by order of the Mexican government, and imprisoned in Mexico City.

He was released a few years later but was never again permitted to leave the Federal district.

He died in 1898.

THE FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

(Concluded from page 82)

at that game. A feller's life wouldn't be in near as much danger, an' his disposition wouldn't get near such a goin' over. Why, toward the end there, Willie Weehaw was foamin' like a mad dawg, or like a range critter that hadn't hit a water hole in two weeks."

"An' does it make a bare-faced liar out of a man!" puts in Cat-face Collins. "An' put double-talk into his mouth! I never heard nobody carry on like Shoo-fly Davis did—I swear I never have."

"Me neither," grunts Puggy. "I was plumb ashamed of him. I'll tell yuh somebody else who's plenty free an' easy with the truth. That's this new sawbones of ours, Doc Carr. 'Cause he said that golf was the fountain of youth."

"Fountain of youth!" sputtered Cat-face. "I'll say he's a liar! Why Shoo-fly Davis an' Willie Weehaw will never be the same men again. Me, I aged ten years jest watchin' an' listenin' to them."

And that, gentlemen, is how the ancient and honorable game of golf came to Cactus City.

●

Next Issue: HORSES WILD, Another Cactus County Story by L. P. HOLMES

An accused outlaw figures that jolly old Kris Kringle must be just, as well as generous!

The barrel of Durling's heavy gun cracked against Farney's skull and sent him toppling

H.W.Kiemle

Santa in the Saddle

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

AT DUSK, Bart Durling eased his pony through the thick brush at the crest of a hill, stopped him, and bent forward in his saddle to look down upon the village called Brown's Crossroads.

The air was clear, and he could see well. Lights were gleaming and flickering already in the store and in the couple of huts that made up the town. As Bart Durling watched, a streak of fire left the ground and arched into the sky, and a rocket exploded into a shower of colored balls of fire. On the evening breeze came sounds that Durling knew were caused by the popping of firecrackers.

Brown's Crossroads was celebrating Christmas Eve.

Down in this arid Borderland there was no snow. No jingle bells and sled with reindeer pulling it. Here, as through most of the Southland, they celebrated

with fireworks. But the spirit of the Yuletide prevailed. Children believed in a visit by Santa Claus.

Bart Durling knew there were only five children in Brown's Crossing, belonging to two families, one that of Bill Teller, the husky blacksmith and wheelwright, and the other that of a man who had come there for his health and did odd jobs and a bit of ranch work when he could get it and his health permitted.

There was the store and post office, operated by Eli Brown, an elderly widower. Brown made a good thing out of his business, for it was the only trading center for miles around, and he sold to small ranchers, mining prospectors, and trail wanderers who stopped long enough to purchase food supplies and then hasten on, always looking at the back trail for a puff of dust that might presage the pursuit by a posse.

Christmas! Bart Durling gulped as he thought of it. For several years, he had been unable to celebrate Christmas in an appropriate way. For him there had been no merrymaking, no warming drink with friends, no real Christmas family dinner. When a man is a rider of the hills with a price on his head, he cannot relax for an unguarded moment to celebrate anything.

But this year, Bart Durling had decided, he would enjoy a little of the Christmas spirit he had missed for some time, and which he had enjoyed before an unfortunate incident made him a fugitive. From being a mere fugitive, he became a notorious outlaw with dead-or-alive notices out against him. And it made no difference that the crimes attributed to him had been committed by others for the greater part. He had learned that it is easy to hang any atrocity on a man already on the run and unable to appear and defend himself.

He had made his plans well, and had picked Brown's Crossroads as his scene of action. He had reached this spot at dusk, as he had intended. His pony had been ridden easily and was fresh enough for a desperate effort if things went wrong.

NOW Bart Durling dismounted and tossed the reins over his pony's head while he strode around getting the saddle kinks out of his body. He removed his riding gauntlets and flexed his fingers and wrists—he wanted no stiffness there if it came to gunplay.

Swinging up into the saddle again, he guided the pony down the hillside through the brush and reached the twisting trail that led to the town. He shifted his holster slightly, and from a saddlebag he took a mask and fixed it over his face. He was smiling slightly as he did this. It was not the ordinary black mask of the highwayman wishing to cover his features. It was a Santa Claus mask he had picked up at a small store in a town far away some time before.

With his lean lanky body swaying in the saddle, he rode on at an easy canter. As he neared the village, he could see, in the streak of light that came through the door and windows of the store, that only three ponies were tied to the hitch-rail. Range riders or strangers had stopped for a Christmas Eve drink, Durling supposed.

The popping of firecrackers had stopped. No doubt there had been only a few in the village. No children's voices came to Durling on the wind. The children were in the huts, he thought, being prepared to go to bed early after the ritual of hanging up their stockings—if they happened to have any. The few townsmen and the visitors doubtless would be in the store gossiping, smoking and drinking. That was as Bart Durling wished it to be.

He slowed his pony to a walk and rode with caution redoubled, his right hand hovering over his holster. None of the villagers was in sight. From one of the huts now came the shrill voice of a child and the soothing talk of a mother.

In a spot of darkness beside the blacksmith shop, Durling dismounted and tied his pony to a post, using a jerk knot that would free the mount with a single tug. There was no moon. The bright stars were obscured in spots at times by scudding clouds. The wind that swept down from the hills was mild. A perfect night for what he intended doing.

He hitched up his overalls, adjusted his belt and tugged at his holster. He felt of the fastenings of his mask and pulled down his wide-brimmed hat until it was low and tight on his head. His boots made scarcely any sound as he walked to the

nearest window of the store and peered inside.

Eli Brown, stooped and almost bald, stood behind his counter squinting through his thick spectacles. Four men were grouped on empty boxes beneath a hanging kerosene lamp. On a fifth box was a bottle surrounded by glasses. Each man held a glass of liquor.

One was Bill Teller, the heavily-built blacksmith and wheelwright who made a living working for neighborhood ranchers and men passing through. Another was Rod Farney, a middle-aged man Durling knew owned a small ranch a couple of miles out of town. He was glad Farney was present. He had wanted a showdown with him for some time. The other two men were young range riders, from their dress, and During supposed they had ridden in from some ranch.

Rod Farney was wearing a gun. None of the others seemed to be armed. All were laughing at something old Eli Brown had just said. They drank, and began talking, and standing outside the window Durling could hear what they said.

"Reckon Senor Santa Claus ain't been hereabouts for ages," Bill Teller, the blacksmith, was saying. "Prob'ly never was here. But I don't tell my kids that. Let'm believe while they can."

"For me, Christmas means nothin' more'n a few drinks with my friends," Rod Farney declared. He finished his drink as he stopped talking. He was a stringy man with a thin face, a lopsided mustache and mean little eyes.

"Storekeepers in the big towns sell a mite of goods around Christmas time," Eli Brown put in. "Nothin' like that comes my way. All I get extra is a few more drinks scratched on the slate. I ain't meanin' any of you hombres, o' course."

"Nothin' ever happens here," Bill Teller complained. "Even Mesaville had a bank stickup the other day."

"Bart Durling did that job," Farney declared. "Walked in masked in the heat of the day when the town was asleep and shoved a gun into the cashier's face and made him fork over. There's a fatter reward on him now. Thousand dead or alive. And another thousand for evidence to convict him of killin' that mine paymaster a coupla months ago."

"Tim Welland? He was well liked," Brown said.

"Durling should be caught and made to stretch rope for that job," Farney declared. "Cold-blooded murder."

They filled their glasses again. Durling had stiffened outside the window and a flash of rage had passed through his mind. He had not killed Tim Welland. He had been in the next county at the time of the crime. And he had not held up the bank at Mesaville. He seemed to be blamed for every crime along the Border!

BART DURLING went to the door, opened it and strode into the store, closing the door again behind him. With his hands hanging low, he walked toward the group. Every man in the place looked up to see the newcomer.

"Santa Claus!" the blacksmith exclaimed. "We've all been good boys, Santa, for the last year. So trot out yore presents. But take off yore Santa Claus mask first and be sociable."

The blacksmith chuckled, and so did the others. They took Durling to be some man from one of the ranches in the valley.

Durling went along the counter until he was within a few feet of Eli Brown. He faced the four in the group.

"Don't make any mistake, gents," he said, in a deep voice. "Don't let this mask fool you any. I just happen to be wearin' it on account of the season. I've worn other kinds."

The four in the group stiffened and their eyes bulged as Durling hooked his right thumb into his belt directly above his holster. With his left hand, he tossed a slip of paper on the counter.

"Fill that order, quick!" he snapped at Eli Brown. "Put the stuff in a long grain sack and tie the sack in the middle so I can toss it across my pony's neck. And be quick about it! This is a cash deal, so don't worry."

"Y-yes, sir!" Brown replied. He packed up the paper and squinted at it through his spectacles.

Durling leaned against the counter and watched the four in front of him. "Take yore drinks, gents," he urged. "I don't mean you any harm—except mebbe one

(Turn to page 96)

WILD TO AVENGE HIS FATHER'S DEATH

A Stalwart Texan Rides into an Ambush

THEY surged across the wilderness to stake out claims in the new Dakota ranges. With their goal almost in sight the crooked San Saba betrayed the outfit and murdered its leader. And as young Tom Gillette prepared for his grim, revengeful manhunt, he faced an ambush of death. Swift action and thrills a-plenty cram the pages of "Free Grass," an adventure-packed novel by Ernest Haycox.

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of you, and I ain't certain of that yet."

"W-who are you?" Bill Teller asked.

"Santa Claus—and let it go at that," Durling answered.

"Hey, mister! I can give yuh raisins and the dried fruit and most of this other stuff—slab of bacon and sugar and flour and all. But I ain't got any canned apricots. Got a coupla cans of cherries I've had a year or so—"

"Put 'em in," Durling ordered.

"Y-yes, sir! Glad to be rid of 'em. How much hard candy yuh want?"

"Five pounds."

"Glory be! That'll almost clean me outa stock on that. Wish I had a few more customers like you."

"Mebbe you'd not wish that if yuh knew me," said Durling. "That whisky on the list—I want the best stuff yuh've got, and none of yore barrel rotgut. It's for medicine much as for a sociable drink."

Rod Farney laughed. "This here we're usin'—it's for medicine, too. Have a dose, stranger, seein' as how it's Christmas Eve?"

"I'll have a drink with you gents, thanks, and even give yuh a toast. Fill her up for me."

Farney poured a drink. Bart Durling stepped up to the box being used as a table. His right hand still hovered over his holster, and he picked up the glass with his left hand. His eyes glittered through the holes in the Santa Claus mask as he watched the men before him. The mask had a wide benevolent smile, but those eyes did not.

Durling stepped back to the counter. "Do me the courtesy, gents, of turnin' yore heads so's I can lift my mask and take this drink 'thout you seein' my face," he said. "You—with the gun on—you lift yore hands high."

Rod Farney was wearing the gun. He raised his hands as they all turned their heads. Durling transferred the glass to his right hand and lifted it and put his left hand up to lift the mask. He tossed down the drink and put the mask back into place.

"All right, gents—thanks," he said.

As they turned toward him, he stepped up and put the empty glass on the box, then retreated to the counter again, giving a quick glance at Eli Brown, who was working to put up the grocery order.

"You forgot the toast," Bill Teller reminded him.

"Didn't forget it—thought I'd drink first and then give the toast," Durling replied. "It's a sorta double toast—here's to outlaws who live as such—open and aboveboard, and to blazes for them as do their crimes in the dark and pin 'em on some other man. Drink hearty, gents!"

THEY stared at him, saw the menacing eyes gleaming, and lifted their glasses. Rod Farney's was empty. As he filled it from the bottle, he spilled some of the liquor over his hand and onto the box. Then he drank.

"You seem to be a trifle nervous," Durling told him. "And I'm some surprised to see you drink that toast, too."

"Why shouldn't I?" Farney asked.

"That last part—about to blazes for such as do their crimes in the dark and blame 'em on others. Didn't expect yuh to drink to that."

"What do yuh mean by that?" Farney demanded, eyes ablaze.

"Don't let's spoil this here Christmas Eve," Durling suggested. "But I'm wonderin' where you were when Tim Welland, the mine paymaster, was killed and robbed—and where you were when the Mesaville bank job was pulled."

"Are you darin' to hint that— Who are you? I'm Rod Farney. Got a little ranch a few miles away—"

"I know all about you, Farney. But it's none of my business just now. I'm here for groceries. Had to get stuff for a Christmas dinner."

"State yore name! Tell these men what you meant by what you said!"

"We'll just let it pass."

"Take off that mask—"

"It'd take gunplay to make me do that, Farney. If yuh want to try any gunplay, go for yore gun."

"I think I know the face that's behind yore mask."

"That's right. You think you know. Thinkin' ain't good evidence, Farney."

Old Eli Brown had put the things Durling had ordered into a grain sack and tied the sack in the middle. He put the sack on the counter and intimated the order had been filled. Durling tossed some money on the counter.

"I figure that's about right," he said.

"Dollar and six-bits too much," Brown told him.

"Buy yoreself a Christmas drink with the change. Keep steady, gents, while I get out of the store. It'd make me nervous if you made a bad move. Better keep yore seats for ten minutes or so."

With the sack over his left shoulder and his right hand still near the gun, he backed to the door and got it open.

"Have a happy Christmas, gents," he said and was gone.

He ran to his pony, put the sack across him in front of the saddle, jerked the reins free and mounted. A moment later, hoofbeats clattered as he rode north out of town.

A short distance away, he stopped the pony and looked back. There was no pursuit; the three ponies were still tied to the hitch-rail in front of the store.

Durling started back to town, leaving the trail and coming up finally behind Brown's store. He walked to a window there, looked in to find Rod Farney pacing around and making wild gestures as he talked and the others listening.

"I tell yuh he's Bart Durling!" Farney was declaring. "I saw him once when he was jailed—that time he escaped. Are we goin' to let him get away?"

"He's already got away," the blacksmith retorted.

"And where has he gone? I'll tell yuh—he's gone out to that little starvation ranch of Jim Stanton's. What did he buy? Stuff for a Christmas dinner. And five pounds of hard candy—and Stanton's got a wife and three kids. The stuff he bought wasn't the sort he'd take to a hideout. It's stuff a woman'd cook. I've always been suspicious of Stanton—"

"Hold up there, Farney!" Bill Teller, the blacksmith, said. "Jim Stanton is honest. He's had hard luck, that's all. And you—you, Rod Farney, outsmarted him yoreself and took a chunk of the little money he had."

"Business deal," Farney replied. "A man's supposed to look out for hisself in a deal. Where else would Bart Durling take that stuff except to Stanton's? Must be well acquainted with him, huh? Are you gents goin' to ride with me and try to nab Durling? Big reward money—"

"A dead man can't collect," Teller

[*Turn page*]

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broke in. "Capturin' Bart Durling wouldn't be an easy chore. Expectin' the rope if caught, he'd shoot to kill."

"Who said anything about capturin' him?" Farney demanded. "The reward notice says dead or alive. He's a killer—"

"I don't ride after him," one of the younger men spoke up, "'less there's a deputy sheriff to lead us."

"Ride to Mesaville and get the deputy, then," Farney urged. "You can get back with him by noon tomorrer. Start right away."

DURLING now backed from the window and got into his saddle. The last he heard was Rod Farney's statement: "I'm not afraid to go after him, and I'll shoot him at sight! The killin', lyin' skunk! What he intimated about me —why, cuss him!"

As he rode away, Durling was thinking that there was no shame in the eavesdropping he had just done. A man on the front end of a manhunt certainly had a right to listen in. This time he rode quietly through the night out the south trail, and after a mile he turned off and cut across the hills—to Jim Stanton's little starvation ranch.

It didn't take him long to get to Stanton's. He approached the dark house warily, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. No dog gave an alarm. A horse snorted in the little adobe stable.

Durling dismounted and took the sack off the pony. He walked cautiously through the shadows and put the sack down on the ground at Stanton's front door. From a saddlebag, he took a smaller package containing three dolls he had bought and carried here. Attached to the package was a scrawled note that read:

Here are some presents for the children. Also stuff for Christmas dinner. Have it ready a little after noon, and I'll be back to eat with you. None of your false pride. This is not a charity gift. This is payment for a great favor you did me once.

Santa Claus

Durling went back to his pony and mounted and rode on—to a little hideout he knew not far away in a rocky canyon. And there he picketed his pony and slept on the ground beneath the stars.

He was up at dawn, ate some cold food he carried in a saddlebag and took a swig of whisky, then saddled his pony and rode. From a screen of brush along the rimrock, he looked down upon the valley. He could see the adobe buildings of Stanton's ranch, and in the far distance the buildings of Brown's Crossroads. Nobody was in sight. A wisp of smoke came from Stanton's house.

Getting down the hillside, Durling kept to the depressions as he rode. He was trying to cut trail. He watched the ground as he rode across land between the town and Stanton's. He found the hoofprints his pony made the night before. There were no fresh ones. No rider had come to Stanton's from town since Durling.

But he wasn't satisfied with that. Rod Farney, the man who would shoot to kill if he caught sight of Durling—for reasons of his own in addition to any hope of financial reward—would be cautious. So Durling rode in a great circle, examining the ground, and when he was almost back to the starting point, he felt reasonably sure no rider had gone to Stanton's during the night.

A coulee ran almost behind Stanton's barn. Durling rode along it with his pony at a walk. He got behind the barn, had it between him and the house, and listened.

He heard Stanton talking to his wife, their voices coming to Durling through the open kitchen door. He heard a child laughing and jabbering in excitement. Stanton came from the kitchen and approached the barn.

Durling put on his Santa Claus mask and led his pony around the barn to face Stanton.

"Howdy!" he greeted. "I'm Santa Claus. Left word I'd be back for dinner."

Stanton eyed him. "Who are you?" he asked. "The note you left—about you repayin' a favor—"

"That's right. Let me put my pony up in the barn. I'll tell you everything then."

Stanton opened the barn door, and Durling led his pony inside the little adobe structure where there was room for no more than two horses. Stanton led his own horse out and turned him loose. Durling tied his pony in a stall.

"I won't unsaddle him," he told Stan-

ton. "Now, I'll take off my mask, but I'll put it on again when we go into the house, and play Santa Claus for yore kids."

SLOWLY Durling removed the mask. "Remember me?" he asked.

"Yore face—it seems familiar. I'm tryin' to think—"

"A little more'n a year ago, I drifted past this way. Had a gunshot wound and was bleedin' bad. Gave yuh a yarn about havin' a gunfight in a range ruckus—"

"Oh, I remember now."

"You doctored me up in time and let me stay a couple of days, remember? You saved my life, in plain talk. So anything I do for you will be a pretty cheap return."

Stanton gulped and looked down at his old boots. "What you left last night, mister—it came in handy. We reckoned to have nothin' but potato soup for Christmas dinner. And the candy and dolls for the kids—" Stanton's eyes were misty.

"You took me in and took care of me and asked no questions," Durling said. "To speak plainly, I was on the run. I'm Bart Durling."

"You?" Stanton's eyes bulged. "I've heard, o' course—"

"Heard both truth and lies, mebbe," Durling said. "I killed a man three years ago and had to run. I killed in self defense, but he was a big cattleman and I knew they'd wipe me out for what I did. So I had to ride the hills."

"I see," Stanton muttered.

"I've been blamed for a lot of things I didn't do. You prob'ly heard about Tim Welland, the paymaster, bein' killed and robbed. I got the blame for that, but didn't do it. And I didn't pull the bank job at Mesaville. Here's a bunch of papers—"

Durling handed Stanton a package of documents bound with a string. Stanton glanced at it, held the package, looked at Durling again.

"In there yuh'll find evidence that I didn't do the things they're blamin' me for—and tellin' who did. For the last four months I've been a bunkhouse hand on a ranch almost fifty miles from here, in the next county, workin' under the name of Jackson. I've been livin' honest. Don't be

[*Turn page*]

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afraid to eat the stuff I brought you for Christmas dinner—it was bought with honest money, Stanton."

"I—I see." Stanton gulped again, shifting his eyes nervously.

"Yuh'll prob'ly be havin' a visit pretty quick from Rod Farney—"

Stanton's eyes blazed. "Him?"

"That's right. I've heard how he swindled yuh, sellin' yuh diseased stock that died soon after yuh bought. Took a lot of money from yuh—"

"Ruined me," Stanton said. "And with a wife and kids—"

"Listen, Stanton, 'cause time may be short. In those papers is proof of where I was when the paymaster was killed and the bank robbed—fifty miles away. And also proof that Rod Farney was and is guilty of both crimes. I've spent a lot of time and trouble gettin' the evidence. Could have got it to the sheriff. But wanted to get it into yore hands. Because, Stanton, here's where both of us get justice regardin' Farney."

"How's that?" Stanton asked.

"He'll come here lookin' for me. I got the stuff at Brown's last evenin', and Farney was there. He guessed who I was—had this mask on. Overheard him sayin' he knew I'd come here. There's a reward for me, Stanton, dead or alive. He'd shoot me on sight from ambush—he's that kind. He sent a rider for a deputy sheriff. The way I see it, Farney will come here alone and try to get me—to shut my mouth forever and also claim the reward."

"That'd be like him," Stanton said.

"The deputy and posse will come ridin' along later, but it'll be too late to save my life, Farney thinks. And he'll claim the dead-or-alive reward on me. And I want the reward to go to you because you shore deserve it. There's a thousand offered for capture of the man who killed Welland and for evidence to convict him. The evidence is in that bundle of papers I handed you—guard it. And I'll see that you can turn over Rod Farney, the guilty man."

"How can yuh do that?" Stanton asked.

KNOWINGLY, Bart Durling smiled before he spoke again:

"If he rides in, suggest he'd better put his pony in the barn out of sight—after he sees I ain't around the house. He'd

know I wouldn't come ridin' in if I saw a saddled pony. I'll nab him when he comes into the barn, get him alive and tie him up to be held for the deputy. You'll get the thousand reward, all right. I've planned it that way, for what you did for me. And Farney will get what's due him. Folks will know too, I didn't kill Welland or rob the bank."

"Pa! There's a rider comin'!" Mrs. Stanton called from the house.

"That's prob'ly Farney," Durling said. "Get him to come into the barn, that's all yuh need do. If yore wife has seen me, tell her not to let on anybody's here."

Stanton stuffed the bundle of papers into his shirt and hurried to the house. Durling popped back into the stable and closed the door all except for a small crack through which he could watch.

The rider was Rod Farney. He approached the house carefully, hand on holster, and called. Stanton went out the front door to meet him.

"I don't want any talk with you, Farney," Durling heard Stanton say. "After the way you swindled me—"

"Don't try to be big," Farney interrupted. "You may be in trouble for associatin' with an outlaw. Did Bart Durling come here last night?"

"Durling? The outlaw? Here last night? I didn't see him or anybody else last night," Stanton replied truthfully. "Why would he come here?"

"He bought a mess of groceries at Brown's last night, and we thought he headed for here. Even bought candy—"

"Then it was him!" Stanton broke in. "When I got up this mornin' I found a sack of groceries at the front door. But I don't understand."

"Do yore explainin' to the sheriff," Farney snarled at him. "If he isn't here yet, he will be. You listen to me, Stanton—I'm goin' to get that outlaw for the reward. Help, and mebbe I'll give you fifty or a hundred of the money. There's a dead-or-alive notice out for him—"

"What yuh want me to do?" Stanton asked.

"I'll put my pony in the barn, so he can't be seen, and hide there myself. If he comes ridin' in, I'll get him. And if he's a friend of yores, and you tip him off, I'll have you taken in for aidin' and

[*Turn page*]

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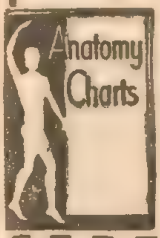

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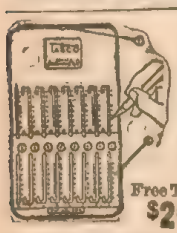

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harborin' an outlaw, and you'll get ten years in prison."

"Be careful if there's shootin'," Stanton begged. "I've got a wife and kids—"

"If there's shootin', it'll be one shot and Durling will be the target."

Through a crack in the door, Durling saw them come toward the little adobe barn, and stood aside. Stanton opened the door and strode in, while Farney followed leading his pony. Coming from the sunlight into the gloomy barn, Farney was blinded for an instant.

The instant was long enough. The barrel of Durling's heavy gun cracked against Farney's skull and sent him toppling. Durling struck a second time, and Farney sprawled. Durling got Farney's gun.

"Rope!" he snapped at Stanton. Inside a few minutes, Farney was bound from neck to ankles, lashed securely, his wrists tied behind his back, his arms and legs bound around and around. He was helpless.

Durling tossed water into his face from a pail beside the door. Farney groaned and opened his eyes. "I'm goin' to gag you, Farney," Durling said, "and leave you right here."

"So you—you and Stanton—are pals—?" Farney asked.

"Nothin' like that, Farney? I made him get you here to the barn. There's a little settlement to be worked out, Farney."

Farney's eyes gleamed. Durling guessed that Farney expected a posse would be along soon.

CLEVERLY and swiftly Durling gagged his prisoner and rolling him against the adobe wall, lashed him to an iron snubbing ring. Rod Farney would be unable to get away. Then Durling pretended to make Stanton go outside, and followed him and closed the door. Farney's pony had been tied in the second stall.

"What he said about you and me bein' pals—folks may think—" Stanton began.

"Don't worry about that. Turn Farney over and claim the reward. Give the sheriff the evidence I handed you. Tell him how yuh helped me when I was shot, not knowin' who I was. Show him the note I left with the Christmas stuff. You won't be in trouble. They'll be mighty glad yuh

turned Farney in. This'll be the turnin' point for you to good fortune. Now we'll go into the house. While I play Santa Claus for the kids, you tell yore wife about things. And tell her to hurry that Christmas dinner—I may not have much time, and I don't want to miss the meal."

Durling won the hearts of the children with his Santa Claus mask and his jokes and laughter. He watched them play with their dolls and eating candy. He choked up a little—this was the life, a home, wife and kids!

He removed his mask finally. Mrs. Stanton thanked him for everything with the look she flashed him. Durling went into the little kitchen to see that the dinner was coming along well. He went out to the barn with Stanton.

The prisoner was safe enough.

"Yuh're goin' to be handed over to the sheriff, Farney," Durling told him. "Yuh're goin' to swing for murderin' Welland. I got the evidence for the sheriff."

Durling led his pony out and tied him to a clump of brush down in the coulee behind the barn. "If I have to run, I'll make a quick getaway along the coulee and hit for the hills," he told Stanton. "No posse will catch me."

They returned to the house. An hour and a half later, the Christmas dinner was ready.

"I had time to bake a cherry pie for you," Mrs. Stanton said. "Hot biscuits and vegetables and fried chicken—"

"Fine, fine!" Durling praised. "My first Christmas dinner with a family for a long time. It—well, it makes me feel pretty good. Would have brought you a turkey, but didn't know where to get one."

"What you've done for us—"

"Yore husband saved my life, remember? And didn't ask me any questions. You won't have any trouble with the sheriff when he examines the papers I gave Stanton. I'll be around somewhere, and I'll know what goes on. Mebbe I'll get clear of a lot of things myself some day. I'll have to hit the trail again—

[*Turn page*]

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won't dare go back to where I was workin'. But that's all right."

They wolfed down the food. Stanton got up and went to the door a few times and watched the surrounding country. As Durling was finishing his second slab of pie and gulping coffee, Stanton spoke from the doorway:

"Dust cloud over the ridge. Riders comin', I reckon."

Durling got up quickly and put on his hat. He adjusted his gun-belt. He saw the dust cloud, and then dots appeared over the ridge—riders.

"They'll prob'ly come up slow and cautious like," he told Stanton. "That'll give me time for a safe start."

He patted the children on their heads, shook hands with Stanton and his wife and strode out. He glanced in at the barn to be sure Farney was secure, then hurried down into the coulee to swing up into his saddle.

A thin wisp of dust lifting over the coulee's rim showed where Bart Durling was riding toward the hills.

A Message from

GENE AUTRY

RED FEATHER SERVICE

OUT in my section of the country, we put a lot of stock in being good neighbors. When you're miles away from the nearest town and hours from a doctor or hospital, you've got to know that you can count on your neighbors. They've got to know that they can count on you to help out when something goes wrong, or there's a job to handle that's too big for one family to take care of alone.

Well, as I look at it, it's just as important to be a good neighbor when you're living in a city or town or on a farm. We all need help sometimes. That's why the Community Chest idea strikes close to home with me. Making a pledge through the Community Chest is just helping out the neighbors and making sure that the neighbors will be helping you when you need it.

Maybe the Red Feather service your family uses will be the Boy Scouts—maybe it will be a hospital or health clinic—or the community center. So when you give through the Community Chest, give enough for **all** the Red Feather services! —GENE AUTRY.

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 10)

The Spanish colonists who were not killed by the Indians sought refuge in the Palace of the Governors where they were beseiged; and though they succeeded in beating off the Indians, they saw it was impossible to continue to hold the town. They abandoned it and fled to El Paso del Norte.

For twelve years the Indians held Santa Fe; they occupied the Palace of the Governors, had their own Indian governor, and turned the chapel into a kiva where they worshipped their gods in their old way. Then in 1692 De Vargas, the newly appointed governor of the province, marched on Santa Fe and made a peaceful entry. He spent the rest of the year subduing the Indians of the northern province, and returned to Mexico.

The next year when he returned to Santa Fe, he brought with him a little statue of the virgin called La Conquistadora. Pausing before his entry on the spot where Rosario Chapel now stands, he made a vow that yearly homage would be paid to "Our Lady of Victory," in remembrance of her aid. This vow, fulfilled without omission in the streets of the Royal City today, is known as the De Vargas Procession.

City of the Holy Faith

Since then in many ways, the Catholic faith of the Spaniards has colored the life of the town. In June, on Corpus Christi Sunday, the Blessed Sacrament is carried beneath a golden canopy for public veneration, an event decreed by Pope Urban IV. The DeVargas Procession follows on the next Sunday, in which the statue of La Conquistadora is carried to Rosario Chapel. A novena of Masses is said between this procession and the returning of the statue to the Cathedral of St. Francis, her permanent abode.

Since 1875 Santa Fe has been the seat of a Holy See. Archbishop Lamy, the "Bishop Latour" in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop,* built the Cathedral of St. Francis in 1869 on the site of the old adobe Parroquia. Today Santa Fe, the City of the Holy Faith, remains one of the great centers of Catholicism in North America.

When Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821, and the flag of the new re-

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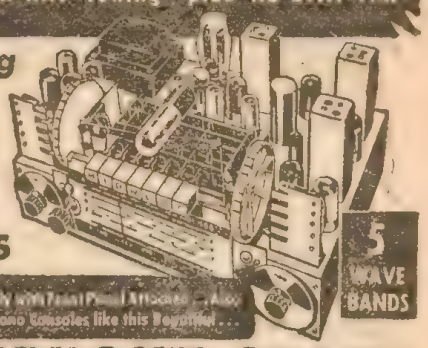

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public was raised over the Palace of the Governors, the plaza was named La Plaza de la Constitucion. Always the social and commercial center of life in the town in Spanish Mexican times, the plaza was an open space of mud or dirt, mud when it was wet and dirt or dust when dry. Yet it was the market place for the Indian wares and garden produce.

Here the captains and the ricos had their homes, while their servants lived across the river in a little settlement called Analco, an Aztec word meaning "on the other side of the water."

General Kearny

After the entry of General Kearny, the Americans planted trees and alfalfa in the plaza, and so it remained for many years; in recent times flagstones have been laid among the old trees. During the Mexican regime the governors continued to live in the Palace.

On August 18th, 1846, General Kearny marched his United States troops into Santa Fe, and after taking supper with the Mexican Lieutenant-Governor, hoisted the American flag over the Palace of the Governors, and in a bloodless victory, New Mexico became a province of the United States.

From that time down to the present the Stars and Stripes have flown above the ancient Palace, except for two weeks during the Civil War when Santa Fe fell into the hands of the Confederates. On February 18th, 1862, after the Confederate victory at the battle of Valverde, the Southern forces under General Sibley marched to Albuquerque and then to Santa Fe, where valuable Federal supplies had been concentrated. The Union forces retreated to Fort Union, and in the ensuing battle at Apache Canyon, the Federal army chased the Confederates down the Rio Grande and re-entered Santa Fe.

The Trade Routes

Trade with the states was opened soon after the winning of Mexican Independence in 1821. Before that time the trade had been with Chihuahua in Mexico. The Spanish governors guarded the trade route jealously against encroachment from the North. But the Mexican governors were lenient and

American traders following William Becknell, "the father of the Santa Fe Trail," were unmolested.

In the late fall of 1822 Becknell brought a wagon load of goods from Missouri. He had invested about $150 in the goods he brought and it sold in Santa Fe for more than $700 which was quite a profit, but this man had risked his life many times along the way. Despite the hardships and dangers along the way, there were many who would take and did take the risk and so trade flourished.

There seems to be no record of crime, only the uprising of the Indians, before the coming of the Americans to Santa Fe. Then with the trade with the states opened there sprang up dance halls, gambling houses and saloons, and with these of course the inevitable gunman.

Great caravans of goods would arrive. They unloaded at what was called La Fonda, the inn at the end of the Trail. The unloading always attracted crowds, as did the coming of the stage coach in any Western town or the coming of the train in any small town. Among those attracted were of course dark-eyed senoritas, for many of them would later receive presents from the bull-whackers and the soldiers from the barracks, who always seemed to be lounging near when the caravans arrived.

Celebrations and Gunplay

The coming of the caravan was like the coming to town of groups of cowboys. The saloons, dance halls and gambling houses were filled and everybody seemed to be on a celebration, and many times the celebrations would end in gunplay.

In 1849 a stage coach line was established over the Santa Fe Trail between Independence, Missouri, and Santa Fe. In the sixties the Santa Fe Trail was mostly a military road connecting Missouri and New Mexico. In the seventies, with the coming of the railroads, the freighters and stagecoaches began to disappear, and by the eighties the old Santa Fe Trail was practically dead.

In 1879 the Santa Fe Railroad crossed Raton Pass and came down toward Santa Fe. But it was found that a main line through the town would necessitate an expensive stretch of road uphill from Glorieta Pass to Santa Fe, so the Santa Fe junction was placed at Lamy, then eighteen miles south of

[*Turn page*]

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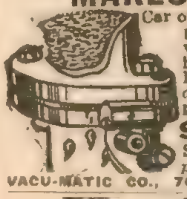

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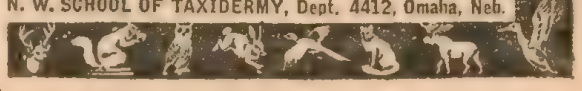

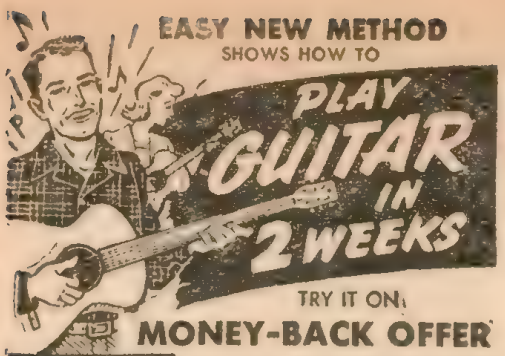

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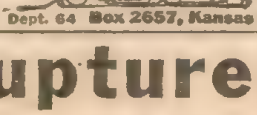

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the town. Today the only connection with Santa Fe that the road maintains is a freight track. Passengers travel by motorbus, and thus Santa Fe is the only State Capital, I believe, that does not have passenger trains.

The coming of the railroad brought a period of prosperity to the town, and it was during the next thirty years that the conglomerate of architectures which face the plaza was built up. But the Palace of the Governors still stands guard over the north side of the plaza. On the other three sides are store fronts on the street level of one- and two-story brick buildings of the style of the nineties, which rub elbows with Spanish-Pueblo buildings. It has been only in the last decade and a half that the town became conscious of the unique type of architecture which is its heritage and returned to the authentic Pueblo style.

A Building Boom

With statehood in 1912, New Mexico's capital began a new chapter in its history. Federal as well as State buildings were erected and there was something of a building boom, but with all the new buildings, the town is still unique. Expensive mansions stand shoulder to shoulder with primitive adobe houses on the same sunny hillsides.

Santa Fe is the capital of an American state, yet the children on the streets chatter in Spanish, and in the rooms of the Palace of Governors stalk ghosts of conqueror, peon, and slave. To one from an eastern city it is almost like being in another country.

There are many interesting places in Santa Fe worthy of a visit by the tourist, aside from the Palace. Among them are the Museum of New Mexico Art Gallery, the St. Francis Auditorium, Loretto Academy and the San Miguel Church, which is one of the oldest churches standing in the United States, built about 1636 for the use of the Indian slaves of Spanish officials. This church was all but destroyed by the Indians in the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. It was partially restored in 1693 and completely restored in 1710.

There are many scenic drives around Santa Fe and anyone may now enjoy the scenic beauty of the surrounding country and the quaintness of the town, but it was not a vacation place to the old pioneers who blazed the old Santa Fe Trail, and but for their courage, endurance, determination and forti-

tude, we of this generation could not speed along where those old time trails once were, where Indians lay in waiting to pounce upon the traveler. Thanks to those hardy folk who went Westward to make homes for themselves and their families we can now enjoy the fruits of their labor and courage.

Adios, folks.

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

PERHAPS the most feared and yet most highly admired group of Indians in all of Western American history were the Apaches. Divided into two segments that the Spanish Conquistadores called *vaqueros,* mountain dwellers who hunted the buffalo, and *llaneros,* or plainsmen, the Apache ranged wide over our far western states raiding and plundering the white men who came in ever increasing numbers to overrun their hunting grounds and liquidate their food supply—the mighty and once numerous buffalo.

Great tacticians, the Apache warriors traveled in small bands living from the land. They struck everywhere with lightning swiftness and melted away like clouds, before pursuit could be formed to ride a vengeance trail. Eventually the United States Cavalry took over the grim fight with the fearless, hard-riding Apache whom the Americans of Spanish tongue had come to call *las sombras de la muerte.*

Bit by bit the blue clad riders of the saber piled up victories over the wraith-like Apaches, until one hot day in 1886 the war lances of the Chiricahua lay broken in the dust and the mighty warriors of Cochise, Victorio and Geronimo surrendered once and forever to the inevitable march of westward civilization—surrendered their wild mountains and sunburnt plains to the white man, and moved under the benign gaze of the Great White Father in Washington to the confinement of the reservation—to live out their days in peace and protective plenty.

And though our Government played square with their charges, fulfilling to the hilt all promises it had made to the Apache, it was sometimes remiss in appointing honest, capable men to administer its policies. Thus it was that the Apache Reservation of

[*Turn page*]

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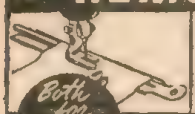

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the Wigwam Range fell into gross and greedy hands interested only in the dollars that could be milked out of Reservation appropriations and caring not one whit for the welfare of the disarmed and trusting redmen.

But such nefarious and underhanded practices are never long hidden and word of the evil days that had descended on the Wigwam Reservation soon reached the ears of a tall man who rode a black stallion and wore two black-butted six-guns belted loose around his waist and thonged tight against his nimble flanks. And one fine Arizona day the Masked Rider came loping out of the hills headed for a look-see into the affairs of the Wigwam Reservation!

Walker A. Tompkins tells the whole gripping story of treachery and death on the Wigwam Reservation in his powerful Masked Rider novel APACHE PLUNDER, which is yours to read in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN.

It all began when storekeeper Stub Avery, carrying a thousand dollars in gold slugs he had just received from Wade Crostick in full payment for a load of sugar delivered to the Apache Reservation, was drygulched and robbed on his way home to Granite Wall in the company of his fiancée Becky Faulding. Riding out of the hills in time to see the shooting, the Masked Rider gave what aid he could to the downed storekeeper and his girl and then took out after the drygulcher who was making no effort to cover his trail.

The Masked Rider followed his man carefully, overtaking him finally in a sheltered bosque where the robber was busy stowing the gold from Avery's money belt into his own saddlebags. Levering a cartridge into his .30-30, the Masked Rider fired the slug through the thief's sombrero. Surprised and terrified, the robber spun around and was thereupon ordered to stand hitched by the Masked Rider, who approached his game with ready rifle.

In the author's own words, this is what happened then:

But the Robin Hood outlaw was not to complete what appeared to be an easily won victory. A rattle of steel-shod hooves caught his ear over to the right, and dismay constricted the Masked Rider's throat as he saw eight horsemen emerge suddenly from the mouth of a draw not fifty yards away, within easy six-gun range.

Then, hearing a triumphant shout from the bayed outlaw ahead, the Masked Rider knew the truth. This bandit was not alone. He was sided by eight gunhawks. Sunlight winked off

drawn steel as the outlaw's henchmen unlimbered rifles and six-guns. They were fanning out, already blocking the Masked Rider's withdrawal into the rocks behind him.

A thunder of gunfire roared out along a wide front as the converging riders opened fire. A moment later they were joined by the heavier blast of the red-shirted bandit's .69 Weber.

With criss-crossing lead drilling the air on all sides, the Masked Rider made his decision. Safety lay in flight—if Midnight could be depended upon for any speed, handicapped as he was by the burden of the deer carcass the Masked Rider had shot just before his meeting with Avery.

And that's just what the Masked Rider does—he runs. And his flight leads him into the very foothills of the Wigwam Range with the outlaws fast on his heels, their leaden death cutting the air around him. Gaining fifty yards on his pursuers, the Masked Rider finds himself in the spot where he has previously hidden Wayne Morgan's big roan.

Realizing that he has but one chance the Masked Rider quickly dismounts, shucks his black garb and sends Midnight slamming off up the gulch, riderless. When the outlaws come pounding around the bend they find Wayne Morgan sitting his roan, calmly rolling a cigarette.

To return to Walker Tompkins:

The bandits reined up sharply, and with rattlesnake eyes surveyed the ruggedly handsome young puncher who sat his saddle alongside the trail.

"Who the blazes are *you?*" demanded the road agent who had held up Avery, resting his .69 Weber carbine across his swell fork pommel.

"The name's Wayne Morgan."

The owlhoot riders scowled at each other, fingering their guns suspiciously.

"My name's Crostick—Wade Crostick!" snapped the boss of the cavalcade, in whose saddlebags at this moment reposed Stub Avery's gold loot. "I'm government agent down at the 'Pache reservation. These men are my posse. We're trailin' an hombre we believe is the famous Masked Rider."

"The Masked Rider," Morgan said. "Then he must have been the hombre who like to run me down a minute ago."

Wade Crostick eyed Morgan with kindling suspicion. "The Masked Rider won't get far," he said. "Not here in Ocotillo Gulch. It ends in a blind box with no other exits."

A frown touched Morgan's forehead. So he had blundered into a box canyon—had sent Midnight galloping into a trap!

"I reckon you better come with us, Morgan," Wade Crostick said. "I'm takin' no chances on you bein' a friend of the Masked Rider's."

[*Turn page*]

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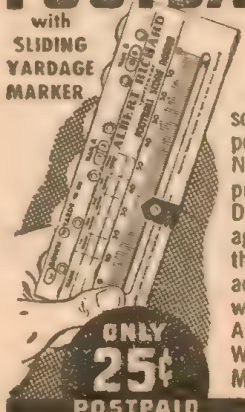

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Bunched in by nine killers, Morgan had no choice but to ride with them. At the end of the canyon, moments later, they found Midnight. Crostick dismounted and examined the bronc. In its saddlebags he found the Masked Rider's garb. Slowly Crostick walked back to his men. Evilly he surveyed Wayne Morgan and then he said carefully:

"This is the Masked Rider's horse. And this cos-toom proves the point. We actually seen the Masked Rider head into Ocotillo Gulch. We know he couldn't 'a' gotten out, without he sprouted wings and flew. So that means—"

With blinding speed, Crostick whipped a six-gun from leather and aimed it squarely at Wayne Morgan.

"Take the saddle tramp's gun away from him," the Indian agent snarled. "If I ain't mistaken, *this Wayne Morgan is none other than the Masked Rider!* In which case we stand to rake in a fat reward for turnin' him over to the law—dead or alive!"

Just what happens to the Masked Rider, whose identity has suddenly been revealed by the fiendishly clever Crostick, is told in APACHE PLUNDER, Walker A. Tompkins' great novel, yours in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN. It's a grand Western reading treat that will hold you breathlessly enthralled.

Also in the corral for the next bang-up number will be a long novelet by that sterling author, Nels Leroy Jorgensen. It is called FILL YOUR HAND, MARSHAL, and tells the story of Lew Spain, a lawman who wore a gun on his hip and a chip on his heart. If you like fast action this is the yarn tailor-made for you.

Train robbing was a hazardous occupation in the old west and perhaps one of the most successful of all pullman purloiners was that fabulous outlaw, Black Jack Ketchum. We bring you the complete saga of Black Jack as chronicled by John L. Parker, and entitled THE ARIZONA SPECIALIST in our next issue. It will give you a caboose full of laughs.

Many other superlative stories and features as well as articles will round out the next issue, which will truly be a gala number. Look forward to it.

OUR LETTER BOX

WE GET a pile of letters each month but when we think of all the folks who read MASKED RIDER WESTERN we figure we don't get near enough. Why don't some of you hombres and gals out there who have never written in, giving us your

views about the magazine and anything else that strikes your fancy, do just that? We'd sure enjoy hearing from one and all. And now for our first letter, which comes from New York State.

I read RETRIBUTION RANGE by Gunnison Steele last night and I just had to write for the first time and tell you how much I enjoyed same. I also finished Johnston McCulley's story, INJUN HATE. I didn't care for it at all. For my money the only good yarn he ever wrote was called "The Mark of Zorro."—*Joan Fritz, Wingdale, New York.*

Well, Joan, you can't please all of the people all of the time, but you can certainly please some of them—witness this missive from the gallant old Southland:

The August issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN was just like eating hominy grits and honey, it went down that easy. I liked all the stories but the best ones were "Carnival Cut-ups," by L. P. Holmes and "Injun Hate," by Johnston McCulley.—*Leonard Turpinseed, Mobile, Alabama.*

Muchos Gracias, hombre, for those kind words. I guess that puts the feather back in Mr. McCulley's bonnet.

I just want to say thanks for all those swell covers. Each time I plunk down my dinero for an issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN I get a great magazine and a wonderful cover painting. I've seen letters in which folks ask for the Masked Rider to be put on the cover. Just who do they think that is on the front of every single issue—Abdullah of Trans-Jordan? That's the Masked Rider, son, and no mistake.—*Peter Potter, Gila Bend, Arizona.*

Righto, Pete, and no mistake. Here's our final bouquet with a brickbat mixed in for variety. It comes from the Tall Wheat State:

Why can't some of the action in a few of your stories be set here in Kansas? A gal would think this great state didn't have a Western history. Just tell some of your writers to look up Dodge City when they're searching for a locale. It had and has everything. I guess I better say your magazine is swell anyway.—*Patricia Reardon, Dodge City, Kansas.*

You bet, Patty. Glad you like our magazine. Well, friends, that drains the loop for this go-round. Don't forget to send those letters and postcards to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. So long for now and write, won't you? Thanks to everybody.

—THE EDITOR.

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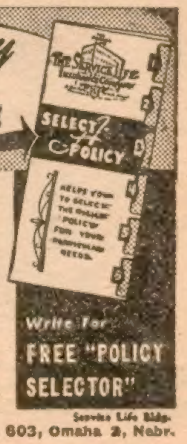

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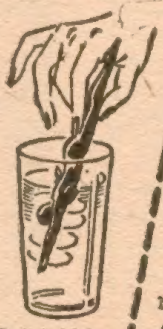

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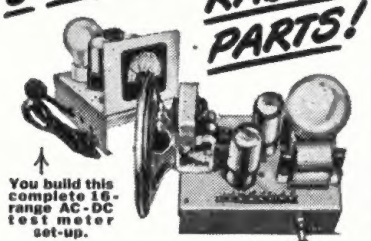

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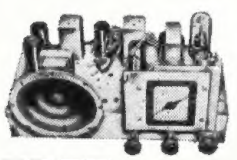

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